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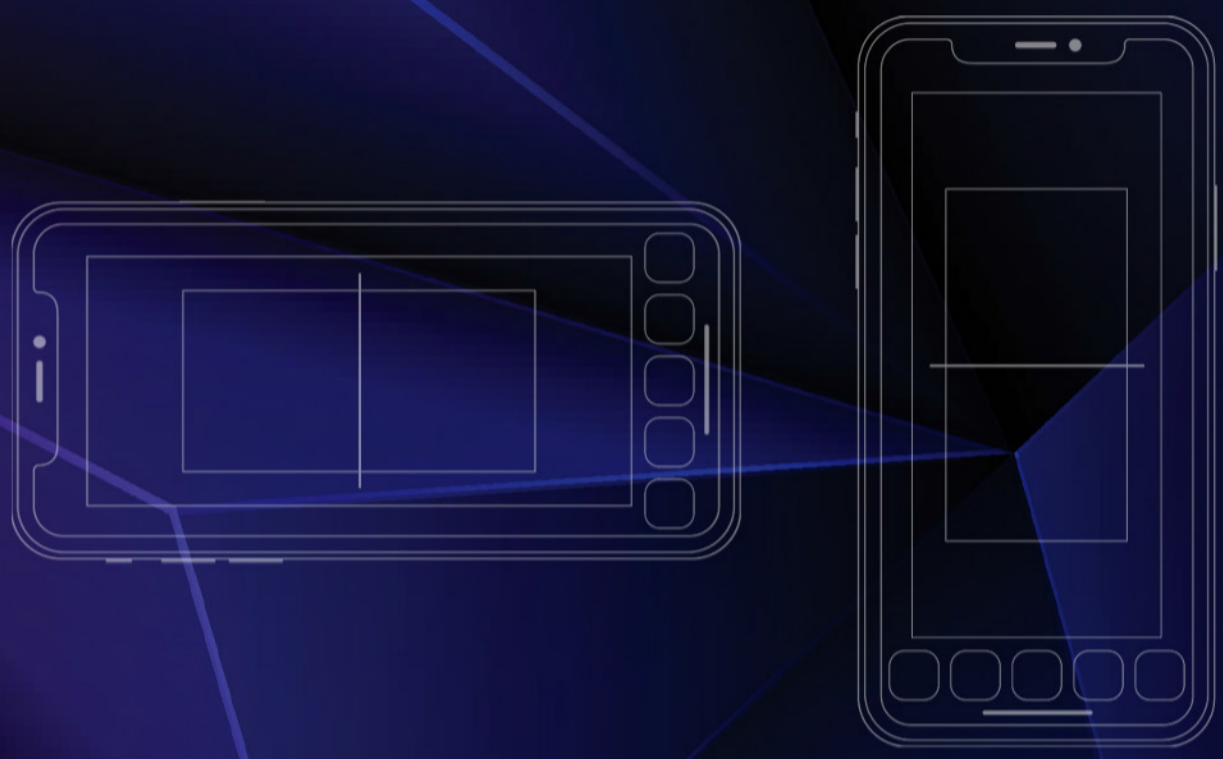

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APPLE HAS KEPT AN ILLEGAL MONOPOLY OVER SMARTPHONES IN US, JUSTICE DEPARTMENT SAYS IN ANTITRUST SUIT

The Justice Department on Thursday announced a sweeping antitrust lawsuit against Apple, accusing the tech giant of engineering an illegal monopoly in smartphones that boxes out competitors and stifles innovation.

The lawsuit, filed in federal court in New Jersey, alleges that Apple has monopoly power in the smartphone market and uses its control over the iPhone to "engage in a broad, sustained, and illegal course of conduct."

The lawsuit — which was also filed with 16 state attorneys general — is the latest example of the Justice Department's approach to aggressive enforcement of federal antitrust law that officials say is aimed at ensuring a fair and competitive market, even as it has lost some significant anticompetition cases.

President Joe Biden has called for the Justice Department and the Federal Trade Commission to vigorously enforce antitrust statutes. The increased policing of corporate mergers and business deals has been met with resistance from some business leaders who have said the Democratic administration is overreaching, but it's been lauded by others as long overdue.

The case is taking direct aim at the digital fortress that Apple Inc., based in Cupertino, California, has assiduously built around the iPhone and other popular products such as the iPad, Mac and Apple Watch to create what is often referred to as a "walled garden" so its meticulously designed hardware and software can seamlessly flourish together while requiring consumers to do little more than turn the devices on.

The strategy has helped make Apple the world's most prosperous company, with annual revenue

of nearly $400 billion and, until recently, a market value of more than $3 trillion. But Apple's shares have fallen by 7% this year even as most of the stock market has climbed to new highs, resulting in long-time rival Microsoft — a target of a major Justice Department antitrust case a quarter-century ago — to seize the mantle as the world's most valuable company.

Apple has defended the walled garden as an indispensable feature prized by consumers who want the best protection available for their personal information. It has described the barrier as a way for the iPhone to distinguish itself from devices running on Google's Android software, which isn't as restrictive and is licensed to a wide range of manufacturers.

Fears about an antitrust crackdown on Apple's business model have contributed to the drop in the company's stock price, along with concerns that it is lagging Microsoft and Google in the push to develop products powered by artificial intelligence technology.

But antitrust regulators made it clear in their complaint that they see Apple's walled garden most as a weapon to ward off competition, creating market conditions that enable it to charge higher prices that have propelled its lofty profit margins while stifling innovation.

"Consumers should not have to pay higher prices because companies violate the antitrust laws," Attorney General Merrick Garland said in a statement. "We allege that Apple has maintained monopoly power in the smartphone market, not simply by staying ahead of the competition on the merits, but by violating federal antitrust law. If left

unchallenged, Apple will only continue to strengthen its smartphone monopoly."

With the attempt to rein in Apple's dominance, the Biden administration is escalating an antitrust siege that has already triggered lawsuits against Google and Amazon accusing them in engaging in illegal tactics to thwart competition, as well as unsuccessful attempts to block acquisitions by Microsoft and Facebook parent Meta Platforms.

Apple's business interests are also entangled in the Justice Department's case against Google, which went to trial last fall and is headed toward final arguments scheduled to begin May 1 in Washington, D.C. In that case, regulators are alleging Google has stymied competition by paying for the rights for its already dominant online search engine to be the automatic place to handle queries on the iPhone and a variety of web browsers in an arrangement that generates an estimated $15 billion to $20 billion annually.

Now that the Justice Department is mounting a direct attack across its business, Apple stands to lose even more.

The Justice Department is following up an other recent attempts to force Apple to change the way it runs the iPhone and other parts of its business.

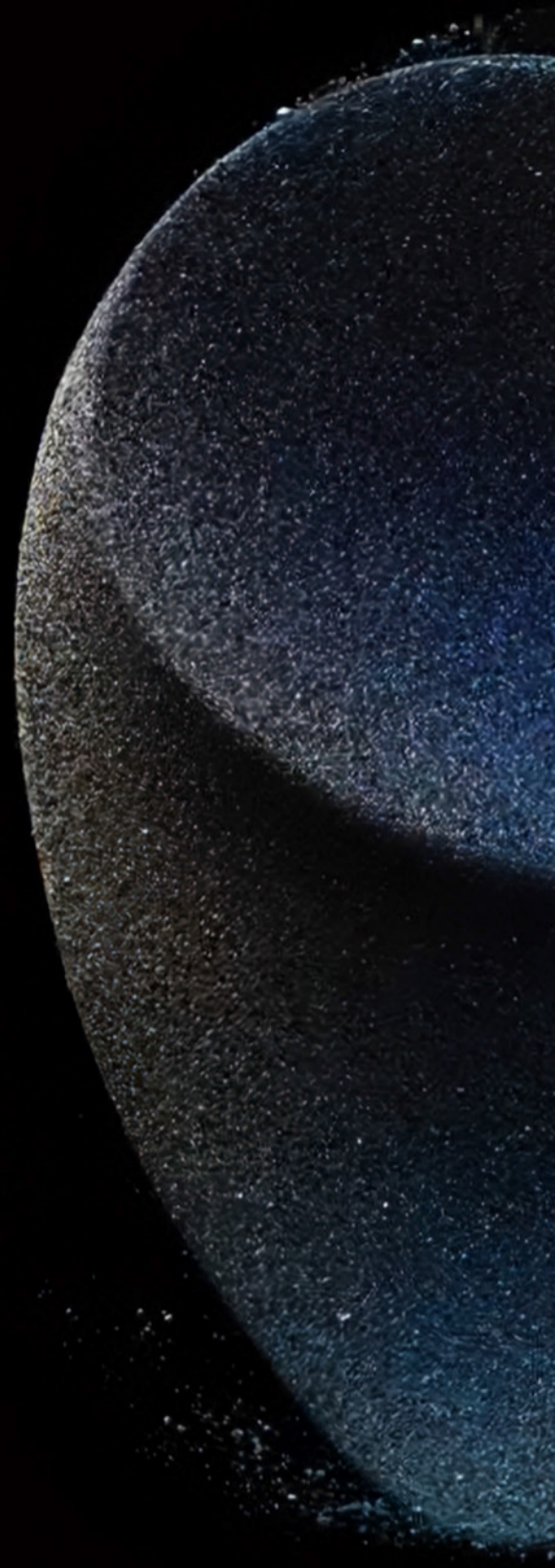
Epic Games, the maker of the popular Fortnite video game, filed an antitrust lawsuit against Apple in 2020 in an effort break down the barriers protecting the iPhone App Store and a lucrative payment system operating within it. Apple has long collected commissions ranging from 15% to 30% on digital transactions completed within apps, a setup that Epic alleged was enabled by an illegal monopoly that drives up prices for consumers.

OF JUSTICE

After a monthlong trial in 2021, a federal judge ruled mostly in favor of Apple with the exception of deciding that links to competing payment options should be permitted inside of iPhone apps. Apple unsuccessfully resisted that portion of the ruling until the U.S. Supreme Court refused to hear an appeal in January, forcing the company to relent. But the concessions that Apple made to comply with the ruling are still facing a "bad faith" challenge from Epic, which is seeking an April 30 hearing to ask U.S. District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers to order more changes.

Apple also had to open up the iPhone to allow apps to be downloaded and installed from competing stores in Europe to comply with a new set of regulators called the Digital Markets Act, or DMA, earlier this month but its approach is being pilloried by critics as little more than an end-around the rules that will enable it to continue to muscle out real competition. European Union regulators already have vowed to crack down on Apple if it finds the company's tactics continue to thwart true consumer choice.

All of this comes on top of a $2 billion (1.8 billion euro) fine that European regulators slapped on Apple earlier this month after concluding that the company had undermined competition in the music streaming through the iPhone, despite Spotify being the leader in that market.



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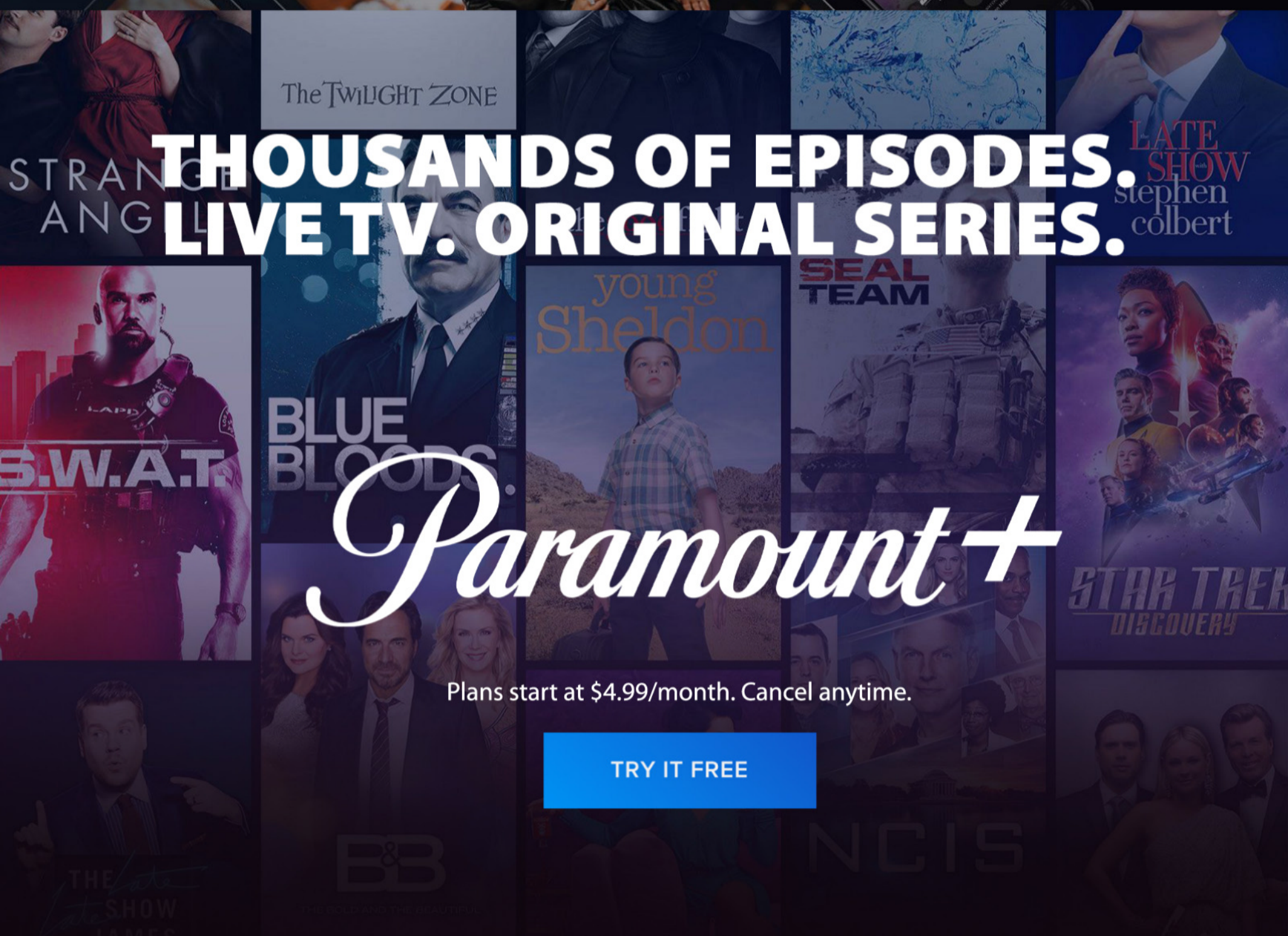

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BOEING TELLS AIRLINES TO CHECK PILOT SEATS AFTER REPORT THAT AN ACCIDENTAL SHIFT LED PLANE TO PLUNGE

Boeing is telling airlines to inspect switches on pilots' seats in its 787 Dreamliner jets after a published report said an accidental cockpit seat movement likely caused the sudden plunge of a LATAM Airlines plane flying to New Zealand.

Boeing said it recommended that airlines inspect the motorized cockpit seats the next time they perform maintenance on their 787s. The aircraft manufacturer pointed to instructions that include how to disable motors that move the seats.

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Image: Esteban Felix

Image: Esteban Felix

The company described its advisory as a "precautionary measure." It did not link the memo to what happened this week on a LATAM Airlines flight between Australia and New Zealand.

The Federal Aviation Administration said, however, that the Boeing memo was issued "in response to the incident on LATAM Flight 800." The FAA said it was convening a panel of experts to review Boeing's message to airlines.

LATAM Airlines, based in Chile, initially said there was "a technical event during the flight which caused a strong movement." In an update, the airline said the plane "experienced a strong shake during flight, the cause of which is currently under investigation."

Passengers reported that when the Dreamliner dropped without warning, people not wearing seatbelts were tossed from their seats and into the cabin ceiling and aisles. The plane later landed at Auckland Airport as scheduled.

About 50 people were injured, according to emergency crews in Auckland.

The 787 is a two-aisle plane that debuted in 2011 and is used mostly for long international flights. The version involved in the LATAM flight can carry up to about 300 passengers.

United Airlines, with 71 Dreamliners, and American Airlines with 59, are among the leading users of the plane. American said Boeing's instructions would have no impact on its operations. United declined to comment.

The Wall Street Journal reported that a flight attendant serving a meal in the cockpit hit a switch on the back of a seat that pushed the pilot

into controls on the 787, pushing down the nose of the plane. The newspaper cited anonymous U.S. industry officials who were briefed on preliminary findings from the investigation.

The newspaper said Boeing recommended that airlines check to make sure the switches are securely covered – they are not supposed to be used during flights – and told them how to turn off power to the seat motor.

Chile's aviation regulator has sent investigators to New Zealand and, under international accords, will lead the investigation. It has not released any findings.

The incident could ratchet up scrutiny of Boeing, which is already at a high level since a panel blew out of an Alaska Airlines 737 Max over Oregon in January. The FAA, the National Transportation Safety Board and the Justice Department are conducting separate investigations related to the blowout and Boeing's manufacturing of Max jets.

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FEDERAL OFFICIALS WANT TO KNOW HOW AIRLINES HANDLE, AND SHARE, PASSENGERS' PERSONAL INFORMATION

Federal officials said Thursday they will review how airlines protect personal information about their passengers and whether they are making money by sharing that information with other parties.

The U.S. Department of Transportation said its review will focus on the 10 biggest U.S. airlines and cover their collection, handling and use of information about customers.

“Airline passengers should have confidence that their personal information is not being shared improperly with third parties or mishandled by employees,” Transportation Secretary Pete Buttigieg said.

A spokeswoman for the trade group Airlines for America said, “U.S. airlines take customers’ personal information security very seriously, which is why they have robust policies, programs and cybersecurity infrastructure to protect consumers’ privacy.”

Image: Michael Pointner

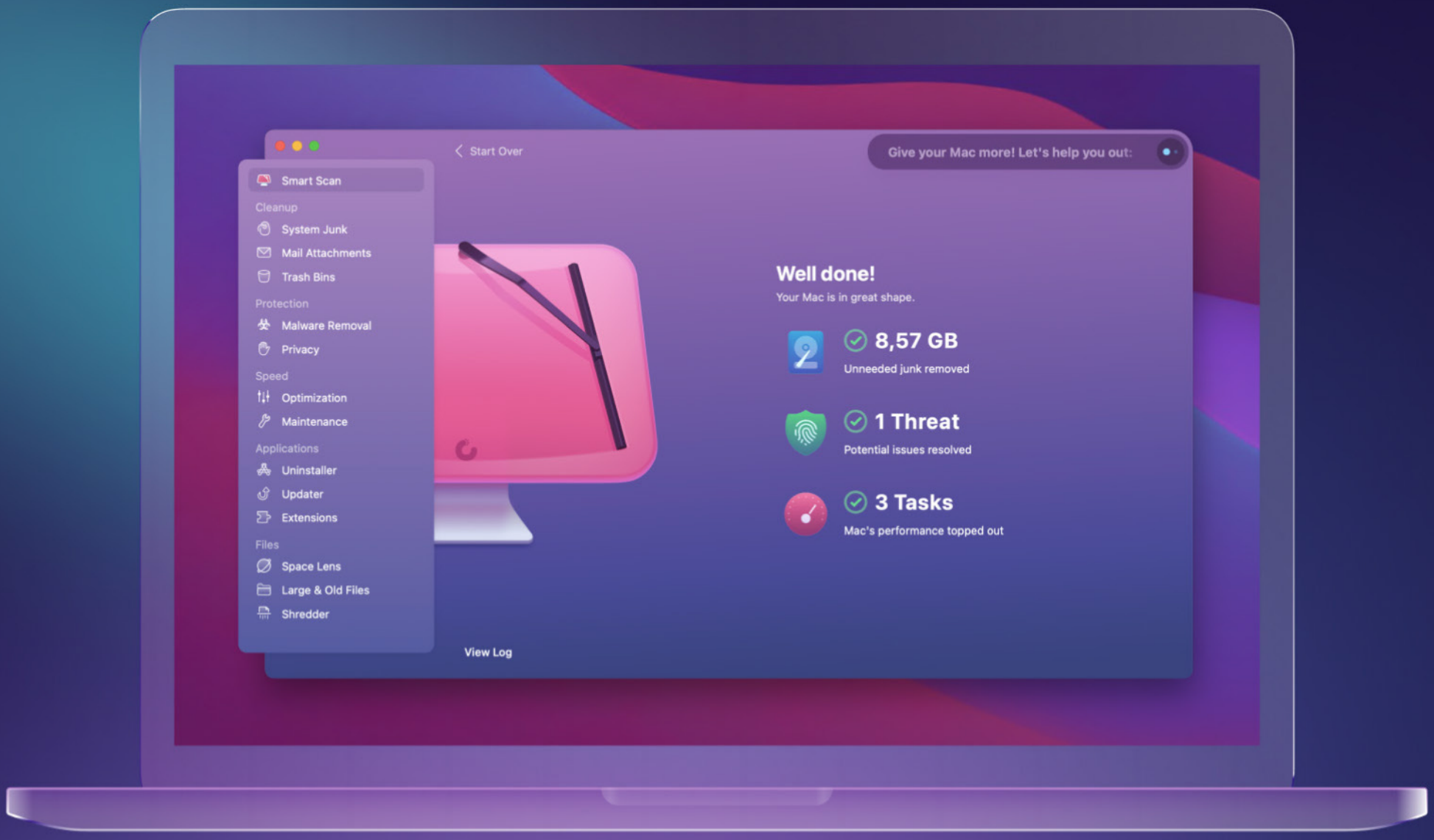
Image: John Toon

In announcing the review, the Transportation Department did not make allegations against any of the carriers or cite any events that might have prompted the move. A spokesman said it is being done "proactively" to help the department determine how to protect passengers' information.

The department said it sent letters to each of the airlines — Delta, United, American, Southwest, Alaska, JetBlue, Spirit, Frontier, Hawaiian and Allegiant — about their procedures for collecting and using passenger information, including "monetization of passenger data, targeted advertising, and prevention of data breaches."

The agency also asked airlines if they have received complaints about employees or contractors mishandling personal information.

Delta, United, American, Southwest and Alaska referred questioners to the Airlines for America statement. Allegiant, which is not part of the trade group, said protecting customer data is a priority, and it welcomes the government review.



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78,000 MORE PUBLIC WORKERS ARE GETTING STUDENT LOANS CANCELED THROUGH BIDEN ADMINISTRATION CHANGES

Another 78,000 Americans are getting their federal student loans canceled through a program that helps teachers, nurses, firefighters and other public servants, the Biden administration announced Thursday.

The Education Department is canceling the borrowers' loans because they reached 10 years of payments while working in public service, making them eligible for relief under the Public Service Loan Forgiveness program.

"These public service workers have dedicated their careers to serving their communities, but because of past administrative failures, never got

the relief they were entitled to under the law," President Joe Biden said in a statement.

Congress created the program in 2007, but rigid rules and missteps by student loan servicers left many borrowers unable to get the cancellation they were promised. The Biden administration loosened some of the rules and retroactively gave many borrowers credit toward their 10 years of payments.

Through those actions, the Biden administration has canceled loans for more than 871,000 public service workers. Previously, about 7,000 borrowers had successfully gotten their loans canceled.

The latest round of forgiveness will cancel about $5.8 billion in federal student loans.

Starting next week, those receiving the forgiveness will get an email from Biden congratulating them on their relief. A message from the Democratic president, who's running for reelection, will also be sent to 380,000 borrowers who are within two years of forgiveness under the program.

"I hope you continue the important work of serving your community," the message says, "and if you do, in less than two years you could get your remaining student loans forgiven through Public Service Loan Forgiveness."

The program was created to encourage Americans to work in public service, including teachers, firefighters, nurses, government employees and those who work for nonprofit groups. After 10 years of monthly payments on their loans, the program promised to erase the remainder.

But when the first wave of workers hit their 10-year mark, the vast majority were rejected. Many didn't realize their loans weren't eligible under the program's rules, and many had been improperly steered into forbearance by their loan servicers, putting a temporary pause on payments and halting their progress toward cancellation.

In 2021, the Biden administration offered a one-time fix that retroactively gave borrowers credit for past payments even if they had been in forbearance or had an ineligible loan. It later loosened some of the rules permanently. Payments made more than 15 days after their due date previously weren't counted toward the 10 years, for example, but the new rules count payments that are late or made in installments.

"Today, more than 100 times more borrowers are eligible for PSLF than there were at the beginning of the Administration," Education Secretary Miguel Cardona said Thursday.

The Biden administration says it has now canceled nearly $144 billion in federal student loans through the public service program and others, including a program for borrowers who have been misled by their colleges.

Biden is separately pushing for wider cancellation for borrowers who have been making payments for decades and those who went to colleges that are deemed to have low value for graduates, among others.

The Education Department is pursuing that plan through a federal rulemaking process after the U.S. Supreme Court blocked Biden's previous attempt at widespread cancellation.

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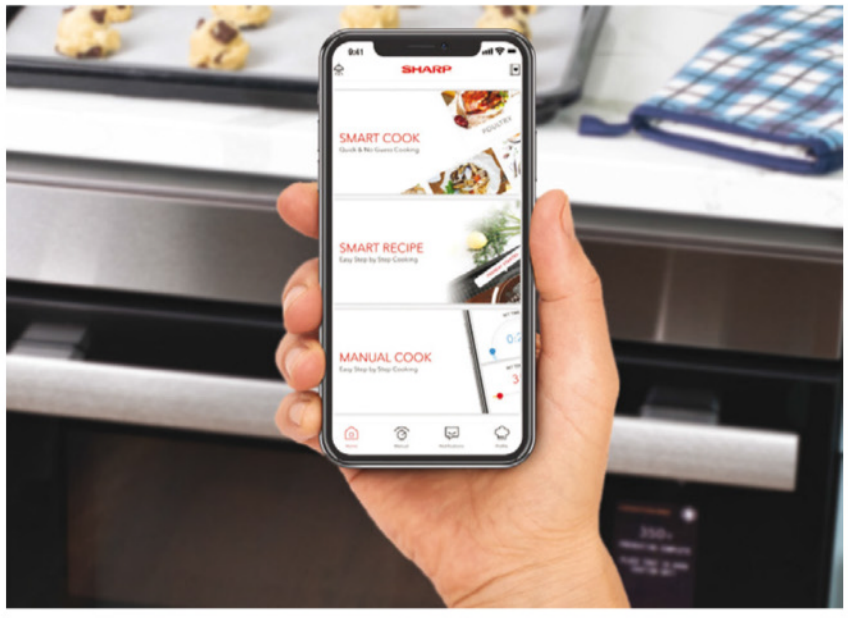

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Image: Gregory Bull

WANT TO FEEL SPECIAL? STORES AND RESTAURANTS WITH PAID MEMBERSHIPS ARE BETTING ON IT

How much does it cost to feel special?

At Chuck E- Cheese, the family entertainment and pizza chain, the price is $7.99, $11.99 or $29.99 per month. At the other end of the spectrum, the founder of a shopping app called Long Story Short wants to charge members $1,000 monthly for anonymous access to such hard-to-get goods as a rare Keith Haring artwork.

Paid loyalty programs are all the rage in the restaurant and retail worlds. Looking for reliable sales in an unpredictable spending environment, more companies have extended

their points-based loyalty tiers to making their most dependable customers feel valued for an up-front fee.

Consumers bombarded with membership offers are promised perks such as free deliveries and first dibs on new launches, but also in some cases the right to jump ahead of non-members on reservation lists and in customer service queues.

It's a method rooted in both the business case for treating big spenders well - it's cheaper for businesses to keep an existing customer than to find a new one — and in the fundamental human need for belonging, said Valerie Folkes, a consumer psychologist and marketing professor emerita at the University of Southern California's Marshall School of Business.

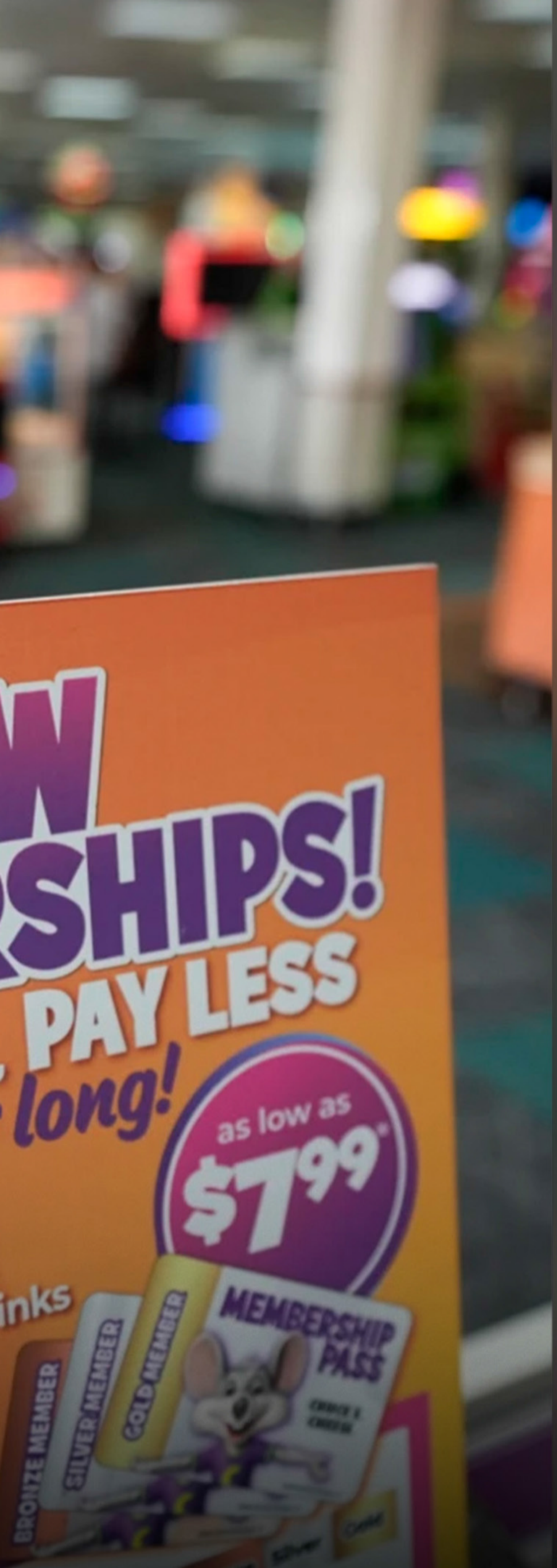
"If they're seated earlier than other people or there's a special line for them at the registers, then they feel they're special," Folkes said. "It makes them feel that there's a stronger link or a bond between themselves and the company."

In retailing, Target Corp. is taking on the Amazon Prime juggernaut with a paid loyalty program that will cost $49 a year between April 7 and May 18, and $99 annually thereafter. Members of Target Circle 360 can expect free two-day shipping and free deliveries of orders over $35 in as little as an hour, the company announced last week.

Target executives said the 100 million-plus customers enrolled in the company's free Target Circle loyalty plan already spend five times more than non-members. CEO Brian Cornell told the hope is the new paid membership "builds more relevance, more stickiness."

Image: Philip Channing

Image: Gregory Bull



Chuck E. Cheese piloted a paid program with bronze, silver and gold tiers in Santee, California in December and launched it in the rest of the San Diego area in February. The program offers discounts on food and drinks and freebies like cotton candy. Members also receive free "play points," which allow customers to play arcade games and get snacks, and e-tickets, which are typically earned from playing arcade games and redeemed for prizes. The tickets and points are automatically loaded on to the customer's card.

Gold tier members, for example, pay $29.99 per month, received 50% off their meals and earn 1,000 tickets. Bronze members, who pay $7.99 a month, have food and beverages discounted at 20% and get 200 tickets. The higher the tier, the better discounts and the more e-tickets and play points customers get.

Mark Kupferman, the company's chief insights and marketing officer, said the program offers good value for repeat customers at a time when families paying higher costs for basic necessities may feel financially stretched.

"So this gives them options that they can come more often," Kupferman said. "We want our members to feel special."

For companies concerned about churn rates, creating a fee-based loyalty program can seem like a win-win in terms of revenue. A 2020 McKinsey survey found members of paid loyalty programs were 60% more likely to spend more on the brand after opting in, while free loyalty programs only increased that likelihood by 30%.

E-commerce site Hive Brands, a startup launched in 2020, wants to be the go-to online marketplace for eco-friendly cleaning products,

toiletries and pantry staples from soup to nuts. But after finding shoppers not returning as frequently as hoped, it launched a loyalty program in January that costs $60 a year.

Members get speedier shipping and a $120 credit for recurring deliveries. Hive also plans to tag them for priority treatment to ensure their inquiries or orders are dealt with first.

"Customer care across the board for us is really important. And so we make that pretty democratic," Hive co-founder and Chief Commercial Officer Katie Tyson said. "However, there's lots of incremental opportunities that members are going to get with Hive in a way that nonmembers can not."

Tech entrepreneur Joseph Einhorn, the founder of Fancy, a shopping and scrapbooking site, is looking to take VIP rewards to a new level with Long Story Short. The $1,000 a month app still is in a testing phase, but several hundred potential power shoppers have created accounts to apply for membership, Einhorn said.

Once admitted, they can view roughly 50,000 hand-selected luxury items, including rare watches and a private island. Members also can request to have items procured for them anonymously, and Einhorn's team will serve as a go-between to get the best price, he said.

"We are like a concierge," he said. "We can get you anything and will be a buffer between you and wherever it has to come from."

As the number of loyalty programs with entry costs rises in the mass market, however, some experts think businesses run the risk of making customers who can't afford to opt in feel left out and diminished.

Alexander Chernev, a marketing professor at Northwestern University's Kellogg School of Management, said shoppers previously satisfied with the customer service they were getting may become dissatisfied when they see others getting more.

"It's about whether the extra benefits (...) are at the expense of someone else," Chernev said.

Walmart was the recent subject of complaints on social media from customers who noticed some self-checkout kiosks reserved for Walmart+ members, who pay $98 per year for free next-day and two-day shipping on many online orders.

Walmart spokeswoman Kelsey Bohl said that during times of limited self-checkout access, some stores were designating select self-serve registers for Walmart+ members using the retailer's Scan and Go app and for independent contractors who make deliveries and returns for the chain and other stores.

"The decision is intended to better manage checkout availability," she noted in an emailed statement.

Some skeptics think paid memberships might be a way for companies to disguise cost increases or to cheat their subscribers by changing the program perks down the road.

Anna McDonald, a senior technical writer who lives in Valparaiso, Indiana, said she's not happy that video streaming services have started adding charges for ad-free viewing. She's noticed hotels increasingly charging an extra fee for a flexible reservation cancellations or cutting back on providing new sheets and towels daily.

"If you're providing a service, it should be providing the full customer service," McDonald, 40, said. "There are some basics that come with that. And companies are just trying to nickel and dime to the basics."

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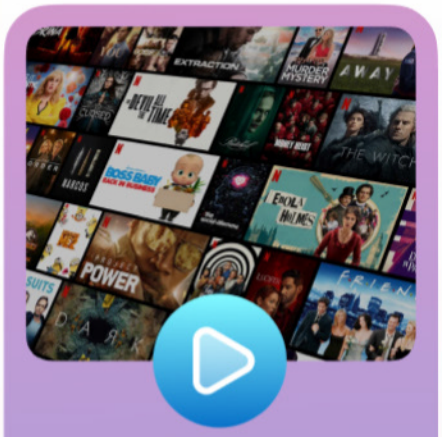

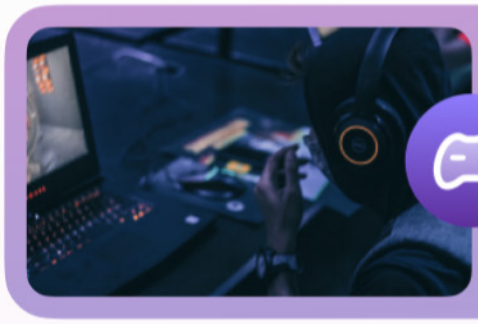

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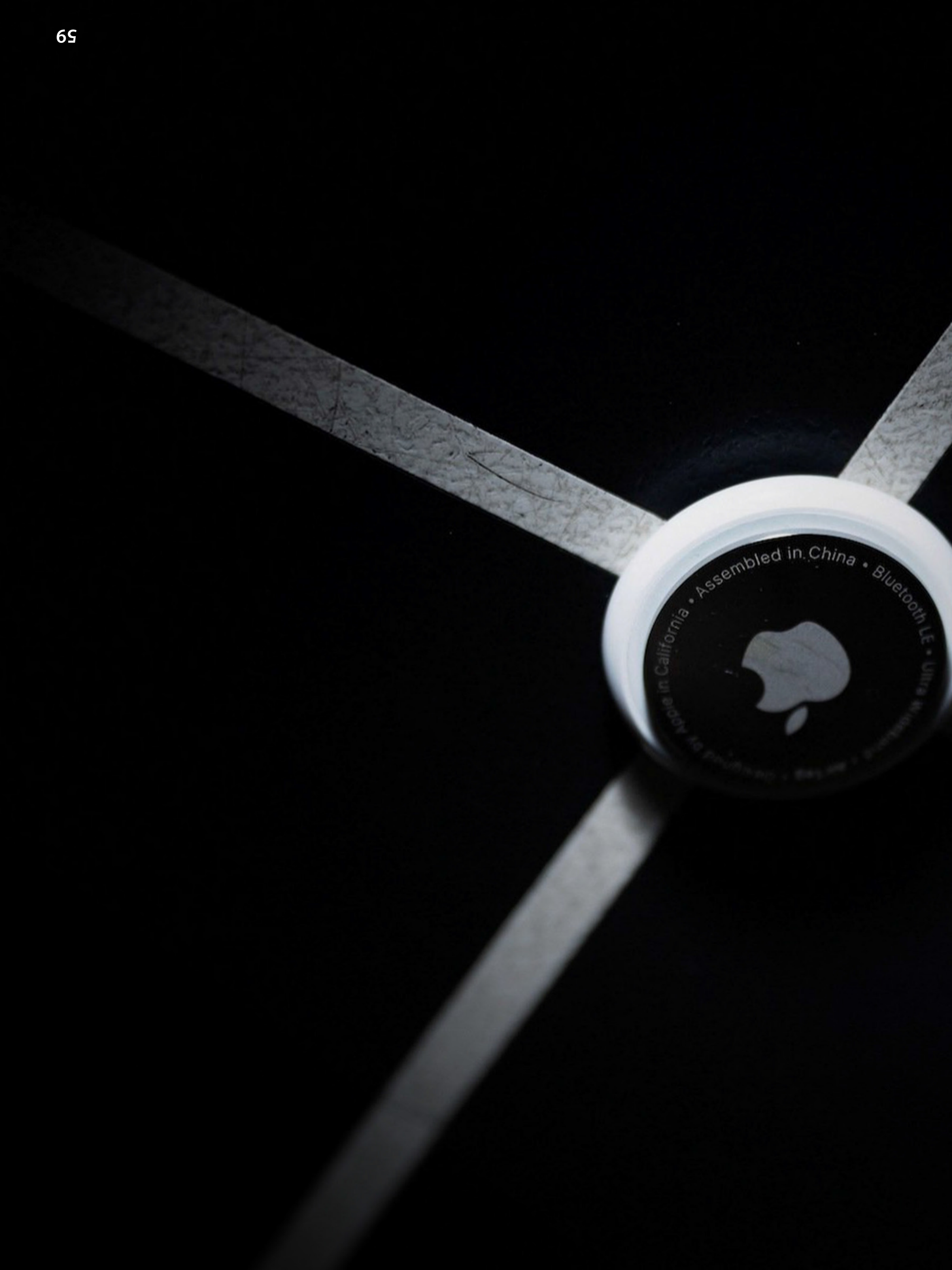
JUDGE DENIES APPLE'S ATTEMPT TO DISMISS A CLASS-ACTION LAWSUIT OVER AIRTAG STALKING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A judge has denied Apple's motion to dismiss a class-action lawsuit claiming that stalkers are using its AirTag devices to track victims — and that the tech giant hasn't done enough to prevent them.

Apple's $29 AirTags have become popular items since their 2021 release, helping users keep tabs on the location of anything from their lost keys to wallets and luggage. But stalkers have also taken advantage of AirTags and similar products to follow individuals without their consent.

In December 2022, Apple was sued by dozens of plaintiffs who said they were stalked by AirTag users. They alleged that Apple failed to mitigate such dangers and should have done more to protect victims — claiming AirTags "revolutionized the scope, breadth, and ease of location-based stalking" and that current safety features are inadequate.

Apple attempted to dismiss the litigation in a filing last year, arguing the company "took proactive steps to try to deter misuse" and that it should not bear liability for injuries caused by third parties. But San Francisco-based U.S. District Judge Vince Chhabria dismissed that motion.

Chhabria ruled that, while most of the class-action plaintiffs' claims were "inadequately pled," three can proceed for negligence and strict product liability under California law. The remaining claims were dismissed in a separate order.

"Apple may ultimately be right that California law did not require it to do more to diminish the ability of stalkers to use AirTags effectively, but that determination cannot be made at this early stage," Chhabria wrote.

Ultra Wideband • AirTag
Bluetooth LE • Ultra
bled in China •

Chhabria detailed arguments from both Apple and the plaintiffs in the ruling. Included were accounts from the three remaining claims of victims being stalked by former partners or others through AirTags that were allegedly attached to their cars, resulting in emotional and sometimes financial harm.

All three of these cases involve "purported defects" of AirTags that made it harder for the victims to both understand the tracking and quickly stop it, ruling outlines, including unclear or delayed notifications, as well as an inability to disable the devices remotely, which allegedly prolonged stalking.

"We're grateful for the opportunity to continue this critical litigation," Gillian L. Wade, an attorney representing the plaintiffs, told via email. "Abusive and dangerous location tracking is only becoming more common, so it's imperative to do everything we can to give voice to the victims, and to push for accountability and change."

Apple and attorneys representing the California-based company did not immediately respond to requests for comment.

Back in February 2022, months ahead of the class action filing, Apple released a statement that said it "condemn(s) in the strongest possible terms any malicious use of our products." It also noted then-planned updates aimed at increasing safety.

Last year, Apple also partnered with Google to submit a proposal aimed at setting standards for combatting secret surveillance on AirTags and similar gadgets.

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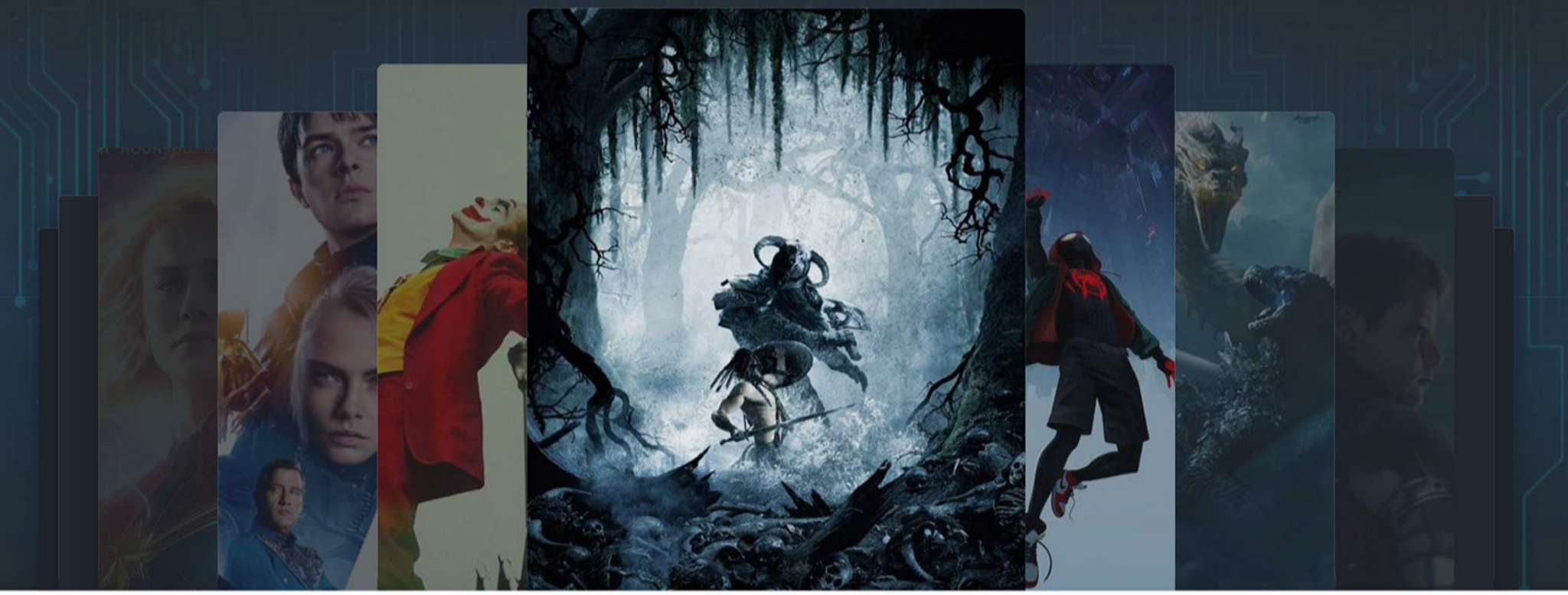

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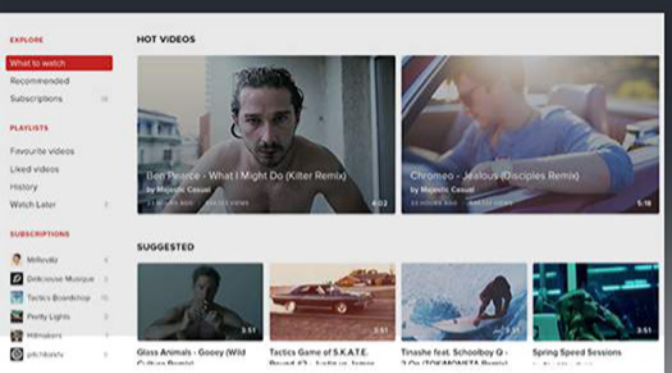

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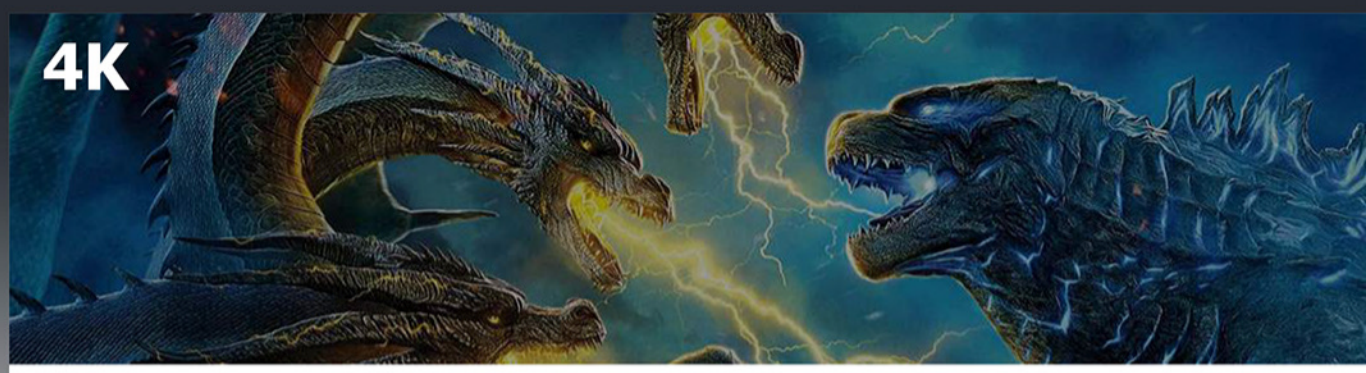

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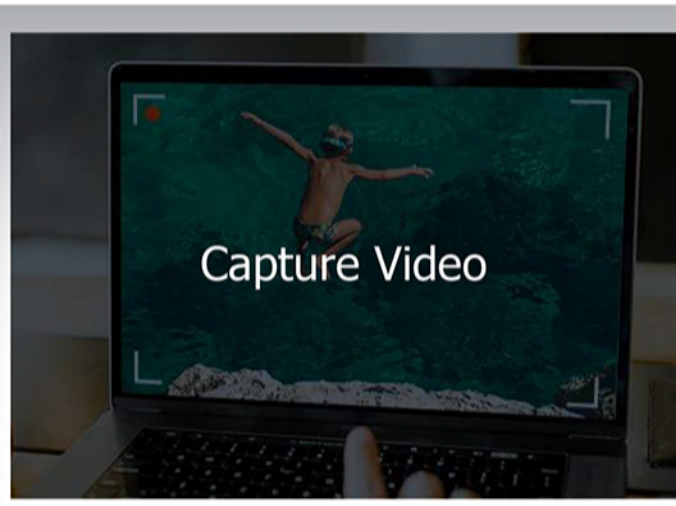

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ELECTION MISINFORMATION IS A PROBLEM IN ANY LANGUAGE. BUT SOME GETS MORE ATTENTION THAN OTHERS

Warnings about deepfakes and disinformation fueled by artificial intelligence. Concerns about campaigns and candidates using social media to spread lies about elections. Fears that tech companies will fail to address these issues as their platforms are used to undermine democracy ahead of pivotal elections.

Those are the worries facing elections in the U.S., where most voters speak English. But for languages like Spanish, or in dozens of nations where English isn't the dominant language, there are even fewer safeguards in place to

Met

protect voters and democracy against the corrosive effects of election misinformation. It's a problem getting renewed attention in an election year in which more people than ever will go to the polls.

Tech companies have faced intense political pressure in countries like the U.S. and places like the European Union to show they're serious about tackling the baseless claims, hate speech and authoritarian propaganda that pollutes their sites. But critics say they've been less responsive to similar concerns from smaller countries or from voters who speak other languages, reflecting a longtime bias toward English, the U.S. and other western democracies.

Recent changes at tech firms — content moderator layoffs and decisions to rollback some misinformation policies — have only compounded the situation, even as new technologies like artificial intelligence make it easier than ever to craft lifelike audio and video that can fool voters.

These gaps have opened up opportunities for candidates, political parties or foreign adversaries looking to create electoral chaos by targeting non-English speakers — whether they are Latinos in the U.S., or one of the millions of voters in India, for instance, who speak a non-English language.

"If there's a significant population that speaks another language, you can bet there's going to be disinformation targeting them," said Randy Abreu, an attorney at the U.S.-based National Hispanic Media Council, which created the Spanish Language Disinformation Coalition to track and identify disinformation targeting

Latino voters in the U.S. “The power of artificial intelligence is now making this an even more frightening reality.”

Many of the big tech companies regularly tout their efforts to safeguard elections, and not just in the U.S. and E.U. This month Meta is launching a service on WhatsApp that will allow users to flag possible AI deepfakes for action by fact-checkers. The service will work in four languages — English, Hindi, Tamil and Telugu.

Meta says it has teams monitoring for misinformation in dozens of languages, and the company has announced other election-year policies for AI that will apply globally, including required labels for deepfakes as well as labels for political ads created using AI. But those rules have not taken effect and the company hasn’t said when they will begin enforcement.

The laws governing social media platforms vary by nation, and critics of tech companies say they have been faster to address concerns about misinformation in the U.S. and the E.U., which has recently enacted new lawsdesigned to address the problem. Other nations all-too often get a “cookie cutter” response from tech companies that falls short, according to an analysis published this month by the Mozilla Foundation.

The study looked at 200 different policy announcements from Meta, TikTok, X and Google (the owner of YouTube) and found that nearly two-thirds were focused on the U.S. or E.U. Actions in those jurisdictions were also more likely to involve meaningful investments of staff and resources, the foundation found, while new policies in other nations were more

likely to rely on partnerships with fact-checking organizations and media literacy campaigns.

Odanga Madung, a Nairobi, Kenya-based researcher who conducted Mozilla's study, said it became clear that the platforms' focus on the U.S. and E.U. comes at the expense of the rest of the world.

"It's a glaring travesty that platforms blatantly favor the U.S. and Europe with excessive policy coddling and protections, while systematically neglecting" other regions, Madung said.

This lack of focus on other regions and languages will increase the risk that election misinformation could mislead voters and impact the results of elections. Around the globe, the claims are already circulating.

Within the U.S., voters whose primary language is something other than English are already facing a wave of misleading and baseless claims, Abreu said. Claims targeting Spanish speakers, for instance, include posts that overstate the extent of voter fraud or contain false information about casting a ballot or registering to vote.

Disinformation about elections has surged in Africa ahead of recent elections, according to a study this month from the Africa Center for Strategic Studies which identified dozens of recent disinformation campaigns — a four-fold increase from 2022. The false claims included baseless allegations about candidates, false information about voting and narratives that seem designed to undermine support for the United States and United Nations.

The center determined that some of the campaigns were mounted by groups allied with

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the Kremlin, while others were spearheaded by domestic political groups.

India, the world's largest democracy, boasts more than a dozen languages each with more than 10 million native speakers. It also has more than 300 million Facebook users and nearly half a billion WhatsApp users, the most of any nation.

Fact-checking organizations have emerged as the front line of defense against viral misinformation about elections. The country will hold elections later this spring and already voters going online to find out about the candidates and issues are awash in false and misleading claims.

Among the latest: video of a politician's speech that was carefully edited to remove key lines; years-old photos of political rallies passed off as new; and a fake election calendar that provided the wrong dates for voting.

A lack of significant steps by tech companies has forced groups that advocate for voters and free elections to band together, said Ritu Kapur, co-founder and managing director of The Quint, an online publication that recently joined with several other outlets and Google to create a new fact-checking effort known as Shakti.

"Mis- and disinformation is proliferating at an alarming pace, aided by technology and fueled and funded by those who stand to gain by it," Kapur said. "The only way to combat the malaise is to join forces."

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SHINES THROUGH A FOCUS ON

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As the streaming wars intensify, Apple TV+ has emerged as a formidable contender. It distinguishes itself through a curated selection of content that prioritizes quality over quantity. Though Disney and Netflix are bigger, Apple's onto a winner with its catalog.

A WINNING STRATEGY

Launched in November 2019, Apple TV+ entered a market dominated by giants like Netflix, Amazon Prime Video, and Hulu. Instead of competing on volume, Apple chose a path less trodden, focusing on original, high-quality content. This strategic choice **certainly didn't win the company favors** in the early days. Still, it's beginning to pay off, as evidenced by the platform's growing collection of critically acclaimed titles, awards, and nominations. **Following the premiere of "Masters of the Air," viewership across all of Apple TV+ climbed by 65% worldwide** compared to the previous seven-day period. The streamer also maintained double-digit growth across more than 100 territories. In December last year, it was reported that Apple TV+ viewership was up 42% year-over-year **thanks to shows such as The Morning Show.** From its inception, Apple TV+ aimed to be more than just another streaming service; it sought to be a cultural touchpoint, offering content that sparks conversation and connection and connects with consumers and viewers on a deeper level.

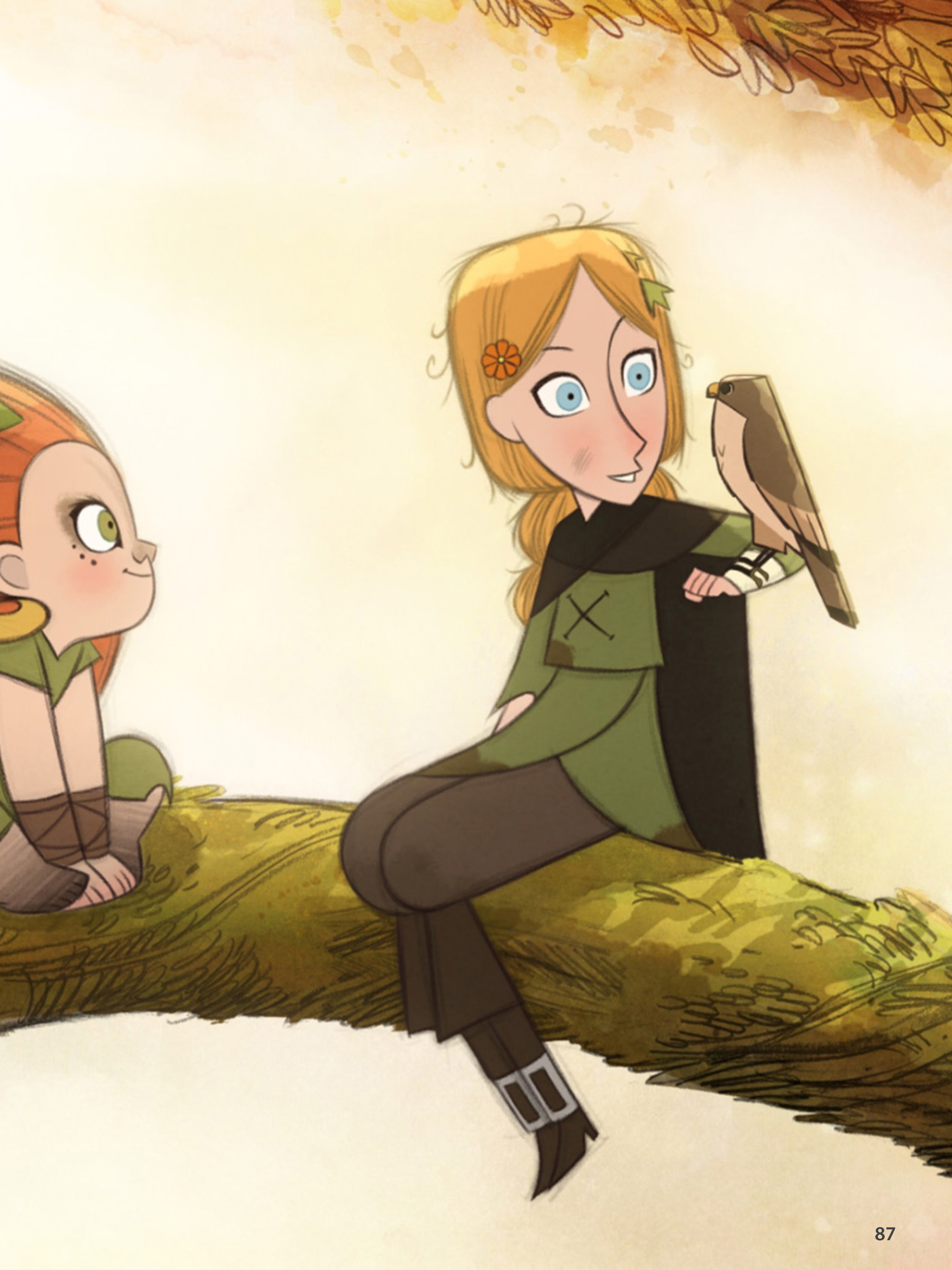
Apple TV+ extends its reach beyond the typical movie and series offerings, presenting a rich array of content genres. This includes compelling documentaries, music specials, and live events that cater to varied interests and demographics. The platform's commitment to diversity is evident in its lineup. It ranges from in-depth explorations of societal issues to intimate portraits of iconic personalities, providing viewers with a broader perspective of the world. The best part? There's something **brand new on the platform virtually every week.**

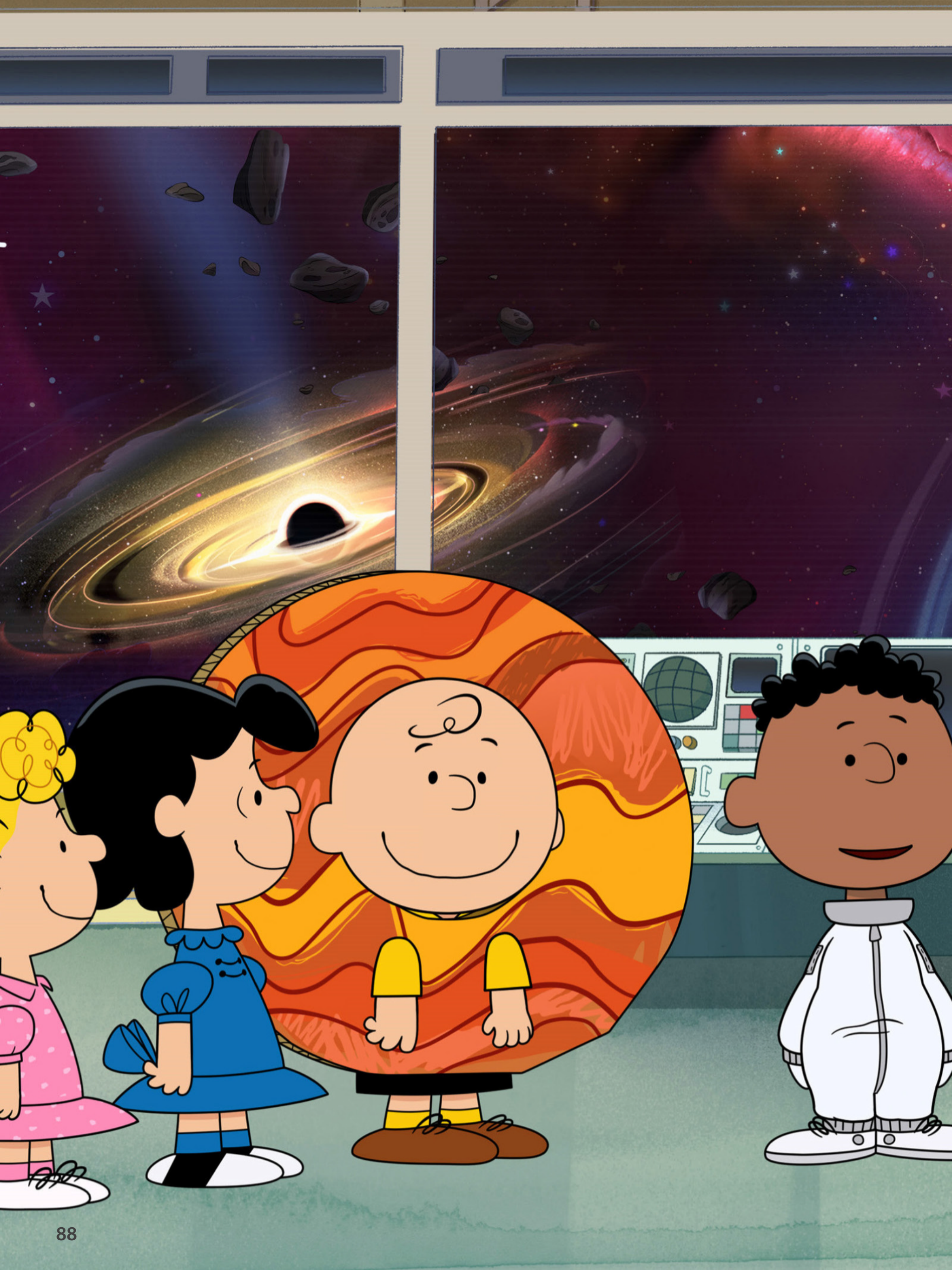
MORNING
SHOW

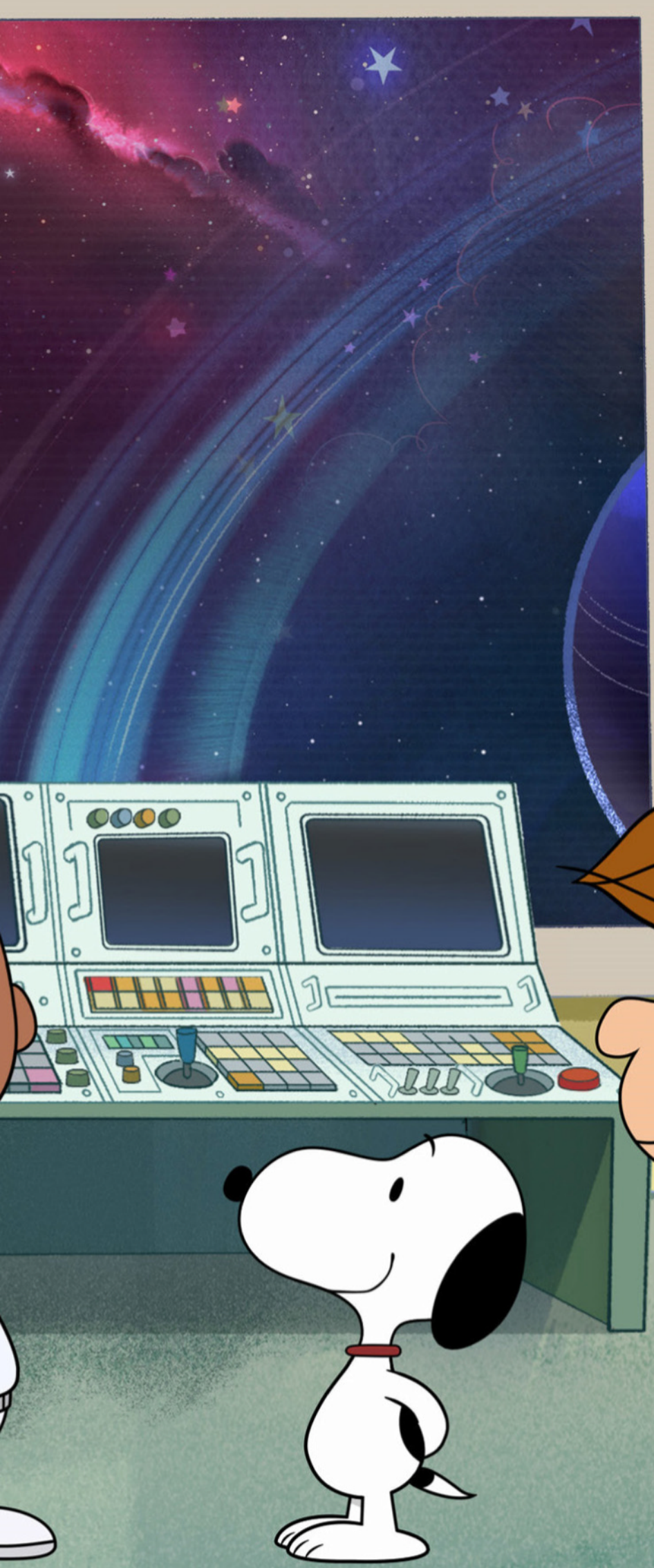
CONTENT FOR YOUNG MINDS

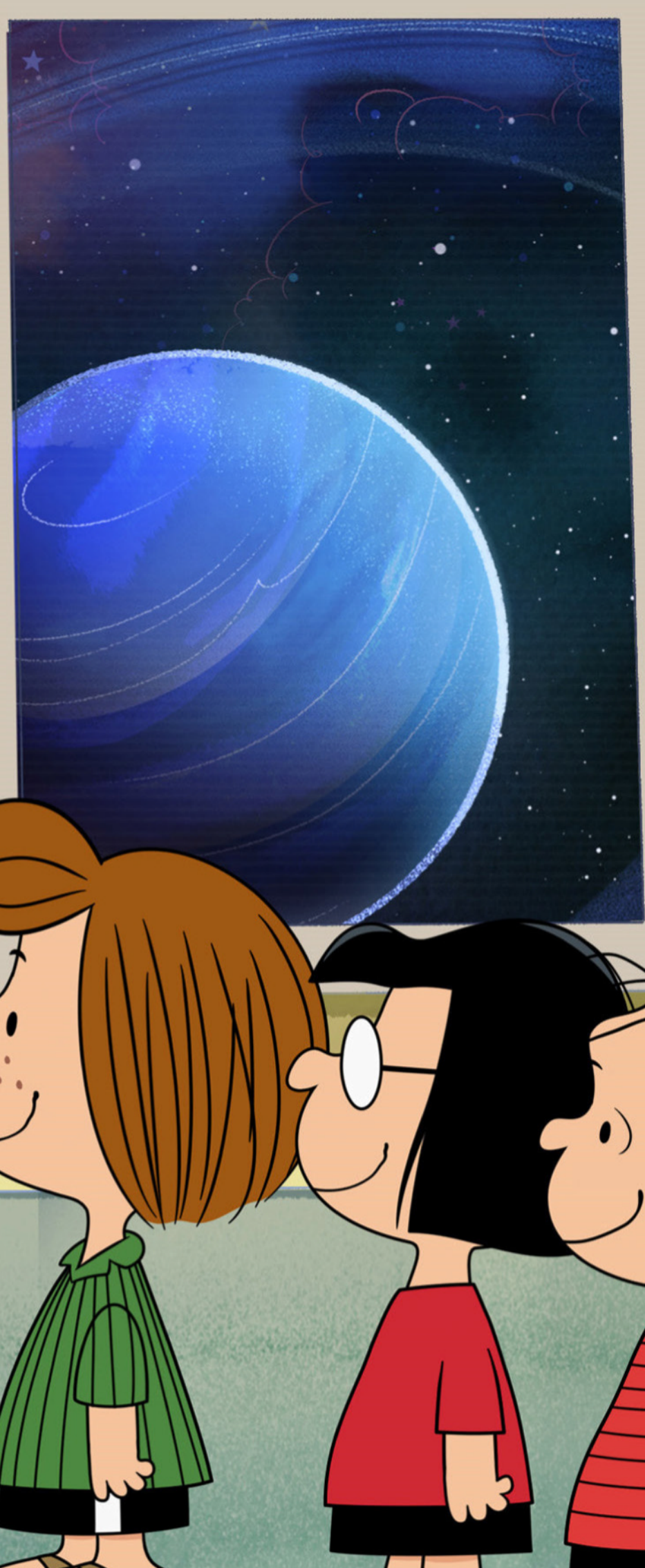
Recognizing the importance of engaging young minds, Apple TV+ has dedicated a significant portion of its catalog to children's programming. This isn't just about entertainment; it's about crafting content that combines fun with learning and creativity with critical thinking. Shows on Apple TV+ not only captivate but also educate, helping to mold a generation that is curious, informed, and empathetic. For parents, the safety and appropriateness of content are paramount. Apple TV+ addresses these concerns by ensuring its original kids' content suits young audiences. Parents can trust that the shows and movies available on the platform are not only of high quality but also free from inappropriate material, providing a safe viewing environment for children.

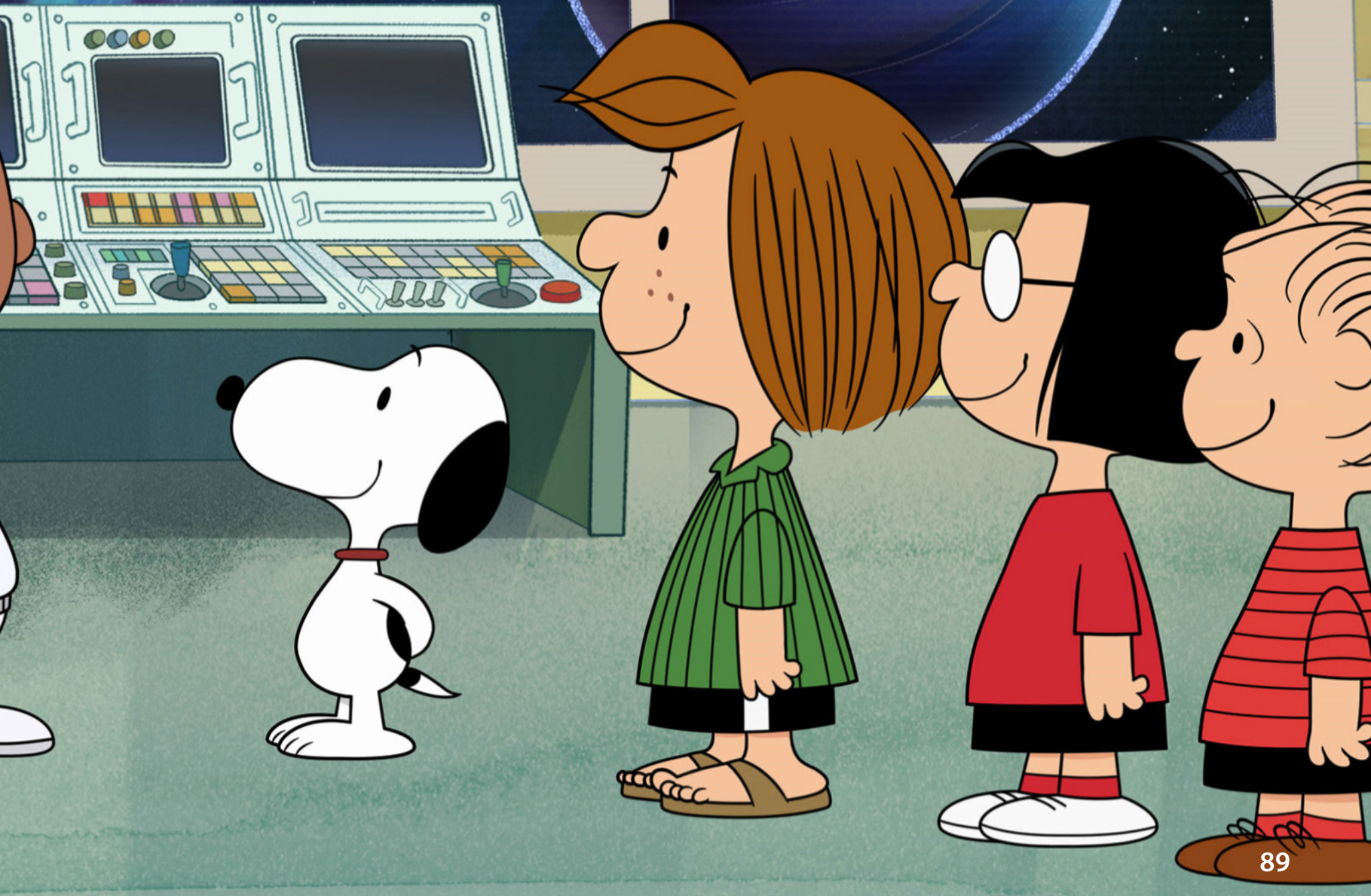
"Wolfwalkers" is an enchanting animated film that blends folklore with adventure, telling the story of a young girl who discovers a mysterious tribe with a deep connection to wolves, while "Helpsters" is a vibrant series from the makers of "Sesame Street" that introduces preschoolers to the concepts of problem-solving and teamwork. "Snoopy in Space" takes everyone's favorite beagle on an out-of-this-world adventure. As Snoopy pursues his dream of becoming an astronaut, **children are introduced to basic concepts of space exploration** and astronomy, all wrapped up in the whimsical charm of the Peanuts gang. Apple regularly adds new content focused on kids, last year announcing "Eva the Owlet," "Frog and Toad," and the **live-action/CGI blended series "Jane".**











SEAMLESS VIEWING

Apple TV+'s integration across devices is a game-changer. This ecosystem approach ensures subscribers can access their favorite shows and movies seamlessly, whether at home or on the move. This enhances user experience, making entertainment more accessible and convenient and solidifying user loyalty to the Apple brand. Apple TV+ is home to various films and series that have garnered critical acclaim and audience adoration. From groundbreaking series to cinematic masterpieces, the platform offers a diverse palette of storytelling. Films like **"CODA," an Academy Award winner,** and series like "The Morning Show" underscore the platform's commitment to delivering compelling narratives. The platform's documentaries like "The Elephant Queen" and "Boys State" offer a window into untold stories and unseen worlds, reflecting Apple TV+'s dedication to content that entertains and enlightens, providing viewers with profound insights into different facets of life and society.

With recent announcements of partnerships with renowned filmmakers and expansion into feature films from other studios, Apple TV+ is poised for growth. The inclusion of external **blockbuster films for a limited time** suggests strategic testing of waters, possibly hinting at a future where Apple TV+ could offer a more extensive library while maintaining its quality-over-quantity ethos.

Apple TV+ stands out in the crowded streaming landscape by focusing on quality, diversity, and innovation. It provides a unique value proposition by offering a mix of original content, children's programming, and an expanding library of films and series seamlessly integrated across Apple devices. We can't wait to see what's coming to the streaming platform next!

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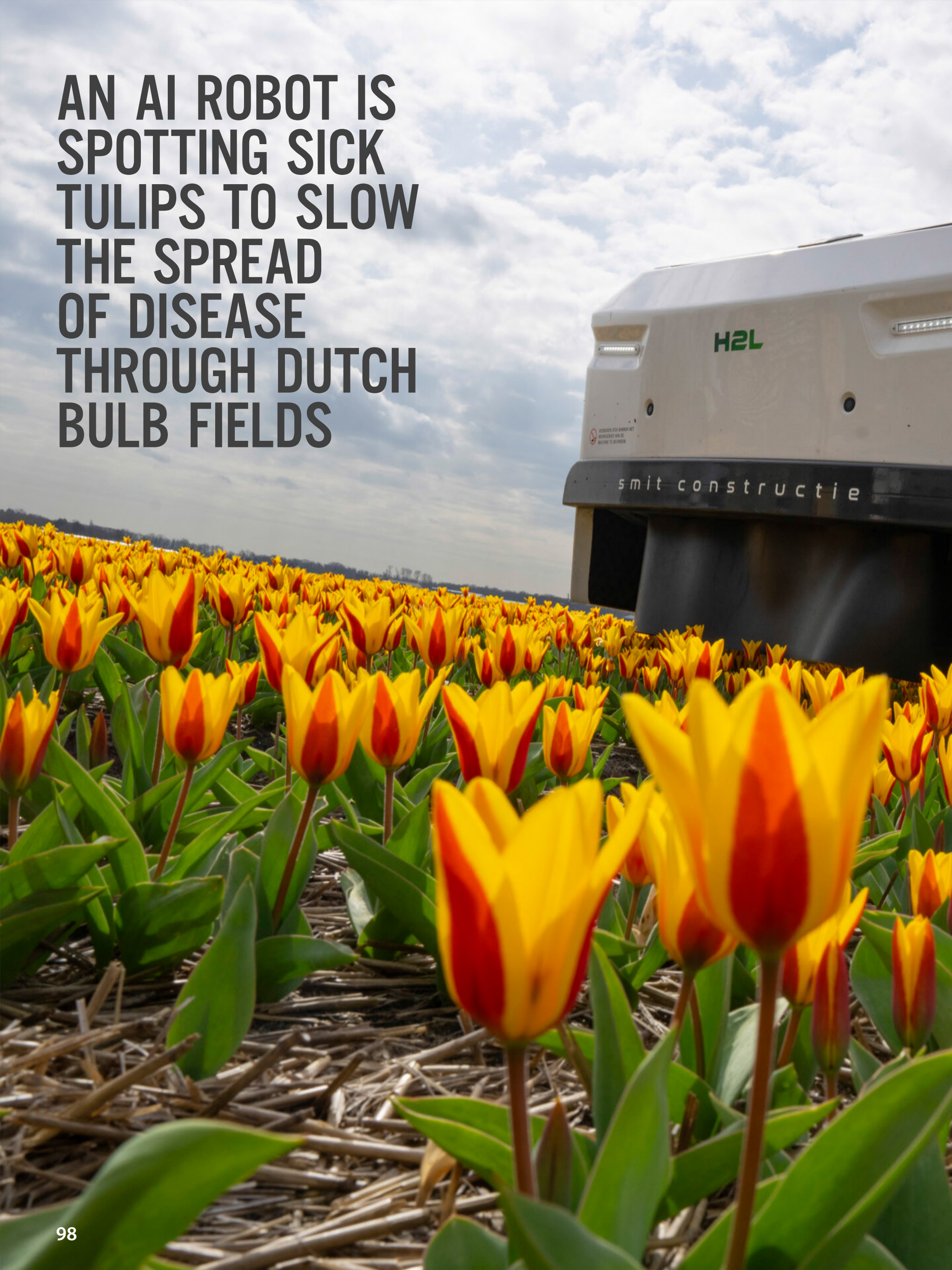
AN AI ROBOT IS SPOTTING SICK TULIPS TO SLOW THE SPREAD OF DISEASE THROUGH DUTCH BULB FIELDS



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Theo works weekdays, weekends and nights and never complains about a sore spine despite performing hour upon hour of what, for a regular farm hand, would be backbreaking labor checking Dutch tulip fields for sick flowers.

The boxy robot — named after a retired employee at the WAM Pennings farm near the Dutch North Sea coast — is a new high-tech weapon in the battle to root out disease from the bulb fields as they erupt into a riot of springtime color.

On a windy spring morning, the robot trundled along rows of yellow and red "goudstuk" tulips, checking each plant and, when necessary, killing diseased bulbs to prevent the spread of the tulip-breaking virus. The dead bulbs are removed from healthy ones in a sorting warehouse after they have been harvested.

The virus stunts growth and development of plants leading to smaller and weaker flowers. It also weakens the bulb itself, eventually leaving them unable to flower.

As part of efforts to tackle the virus, there are 45 robots patrolling tulip fields across the Netherlands as the weather warms up and farmers approach peak season when their bulbs bloom into giant patchworks of color that draws tourists from around the world.

In the past, this was work carried out by human "sickness spotters," said Allan Visser, a third-generation tulip farmer who is using the robot for the second growing season.

"You could also buy a very nice sports car," for the price of the robot, Visser said — its makers say the robot costs 185,000 euros ($200,000).

"But I prefer to have the robot because a sports car doesn't take out the sick tulips from our field. Yeah, it is expensive, but there are less and less people who can really see the sick tulips," he added.

It's a lot slower than a sports car, rolling on caterpillar tracks through fields at one kilometer per hour (0.6 mph) hunting out the telltale red stripes that form on the leaves of infected flowers.

"It has cameras in the front, and it makes thousands of pictures of the tulips. Then it will, determine if the tulip is sick or not by its AI model," Visser explained, calling it "precision agriculture."

"The robot has learned to recognize this and to treat it," he added.

Erik de Jong of H2L Robotics, the company that makes the robots, says artificial intelligence helps them identify sick flowers and very precise GPS coordinates allows them to pinpoint the flowers that need to be destroyed.

"The heart of the machine is the knowledge that we put into the AI model. The knowledge comes from tulip farmers. So we we use the knowledge of the tulip farmers, we combine it into an AI model," he said.

Theo van der Voort, who gave his name to the robot at WAM Pennings farm, and who retired after 52 years hunting for sick flowers, is impressed.

"It's fantastic," he said. "It sees just as much as I see."

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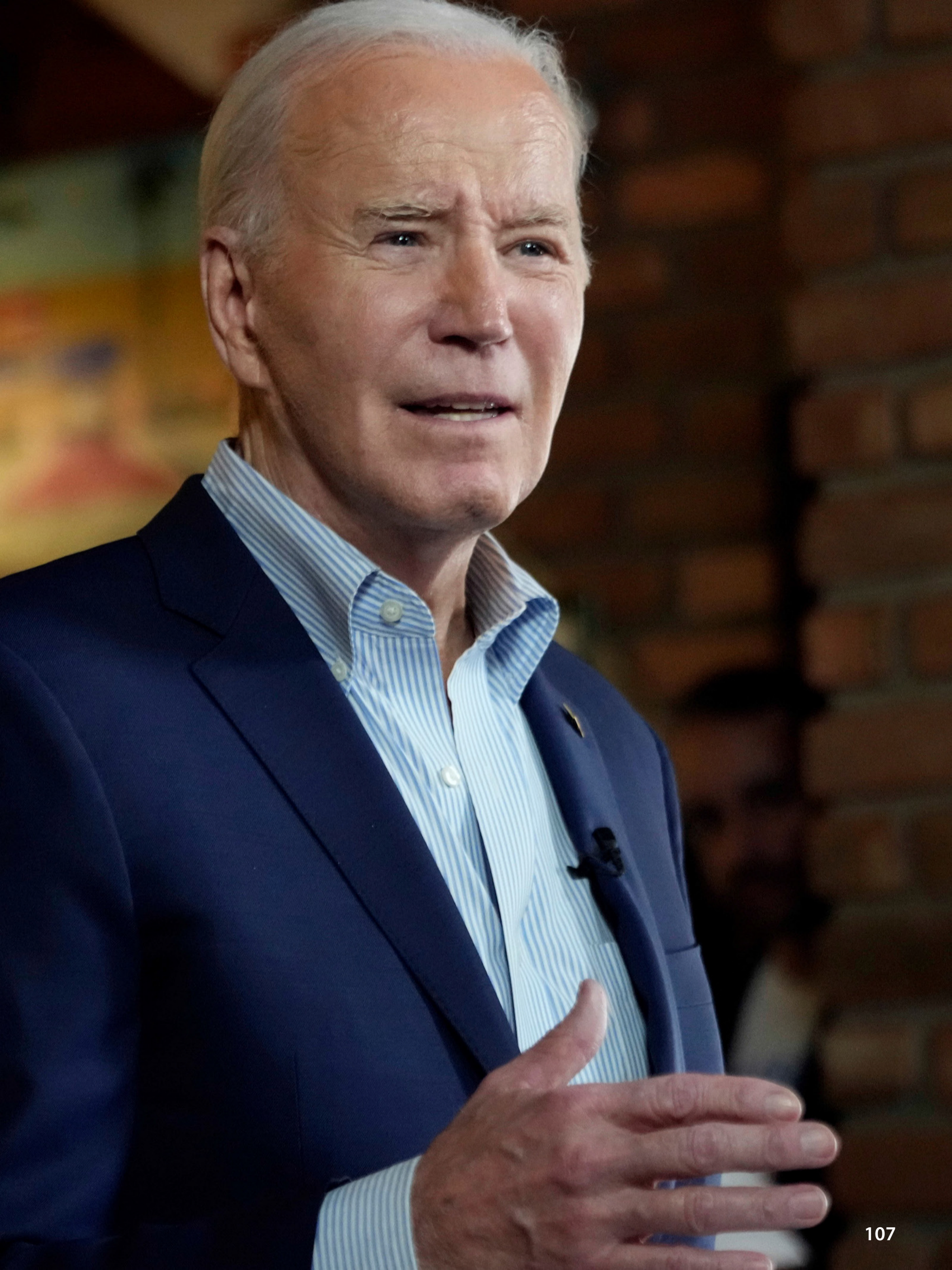
BIDEN TO TOUT GOVERNMENT INVESTING $8.5 BILLION IN INTEL'S COMPUTER CHIP PLANTS IN FOUR STATES

The Biden administration has reached an agreement to provide Intel with up to $8.5 billion in direct funding and $11 billion in loans for computer chip plants in Arizona, Ohio, New Mexico and Oregon.

President Joe Biden plans to talk up the investment on Wednesday as he visits Intel's campus in Chandler, Arizona, which could be a decisive swing state in November's election.



He has often said that not enough voters know about his economic policies and suggested that more would support him if they did know.

Commerce Secretary Gina Raimondo said the deal reached through her department would put the United States in a position to produce 20% of the world's most advanced chips by 2030, up from the current level of zero. The United States designs advanced chips, but its inability to make them domestically has emerged as a national security and economic risk.

"Failure is not an option — leading-edge chips are the core of our innovation system, especially when it comes to advances in artificial intelligence and our military systems," Raimondo said on a call with reporters. "We can't just design chips. We have to make them in America."

The funding announcement comes amid the heat of the 2024 presidential campaign. Biden has been telling voters that his policies have led to a resurgence in U.S. manufacturing and job growth. His message is a direct challenge to former President Donald Trump, the presumptive Republican nominee, who raised tariffs while in the White House and wants to do so again on the promise of protecting U.S. factory jobs from China.

Biden narrowly beat Trump in Arizona in 2020 by a margin of 49.4% to 49.1%.

U.S. adults have dim views of Biden's economic leadership, with just 34% approving, according to a February poll. The lingering impact of inflation hitting a four-decade high in 2022 has hurt the Democrat, who had a 52% approval on the economy in July 2021.

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Intel's projects would be funded in part through the bipartisan 2022 CHIPS and Science Act, which the Biden administration helped shepherd through Congress at a time of concerns after the pandemic that the loss of access to chips made in Asia could plunge the U.S. economy into recession.

When pushing for the investment, lawmakers expressed concern about efforts by China to control Taiwan, which accounts for more than 90% of advanced computer chip production.

Ohio Sen. Sherrod Brown, a Democrat up for reelection this year, stressed that his state would become "a global leader in semiconductor manufacturing" as Intel would be generating thousands of jobs. Ohio has voted for Trump in the past two presidential elections, and Brown in November will face Republican Bernie Moreno, a Trump-backed businessman from Cleveland.

Wednesday's announcement is the fourth and largest so far under the chips law, with the government support expected to help enable Intel to make $100 billion in capital investments over five years. About 25% of that total would involve building and land, while roughly 70% would go to equipment, said Pat Gelsinger, CEO of Intel.

"We think of this as a defining moment for the United States, the semiconductor industry and for Intel," said Gelsinger, who called the CHIPS Act "the most critical industrial policy legislation since World War II."

The Intel CEO said on a call with reporters that he would like to see a sequel to the 2022 law in order to provide additional funding for the industry.

Biden administration officials say that computer chip companies would not be investing domestically at their expected scale without the government support. Intel funding would lead to a combined 30,000 manufacturing and construction jobs. The company also plans to claim tax credits from the Treasury Department worth up to 25% on qualified investments.

The Santa Clara, California-based company will use the funding in four different states. In Chandler, Arizona, the money will help to build two new chip plants and modernize an existing one. The funding will establish two advanced plants in New Albany, Ohio, which is just outside the state capital of Columbus.

The company will also turn two of its plants in Rio Rancho, New Mexico into advanced packaging facilities. And Intel will also modernize facilities in Hillsboro, Oregon.

The Biden administration has also made workforce training and access to affordable child care a priority in agreements to support companies. Under the agreement with the Commerce Department, Intel will commit to local training programs as well as increase the reimbursement amount for its child care program, among other efforts.

AS ELECTRIC VEHICLE SALES SLOW, US RELAXES PLANS FOR STRICTER AUTO EMISSIONS STANDARDS FOR A WHILE

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The Biden administration this week is expected to announce new automobile emissions standards that relax proposed limits for three years but eventually reach the same strict standards proposed by the Environmental Protection Agency.

The changes come as sales of zero-tailpipe emissions electric vehicles, which are needed to meet the standards, have begun to slow. The auto industry has cited lower sales growth in objecting to the EPA's preferred standards unveiled last April as part of the most ambitious plan ever to cut planet-warming emissions from passenger vehicles.

The EPA suggested that under its preferred alternative, the industry could meet the limits if 67% of new vehicle sales are electric by 2032.

But during a public comment period on the standards for 2027 through 2032, the auto industry called the benchmarks unworkable with EV sales slowing as consumers worry about cost, range and a lack of publicly available charging stations.

Three people with knowledge of the standards say the Biden EPA will pick an alternative that slows implementation from 2027 through 2029, but ramps up to reach the level the EPA preferred from 2030 to 2032. The alternative will have other unspecified modifications that help the auto industry meet the standards, one of the people said.

The people, two from the auto industry and one from the government, didn't want to be identified because the new standards haven't been made public by the EPA.

The changes appear aimed at addressing strong industry opposition to the accelerated ramp-up of EVs, along with public reluctance to fully embrace the new technology. There is also a legitimate threat of legal challenges before conservative courts.

The Supreme Court, with a 6-3 conservative majority, has increasingly reined in the powers of federal agencies, including the EPA, in recent years. The justices have restricted the EPA's authority to fight air and water pollution — including a landmark 2022 ruling that limited the EPA's authority to regulate carbon dioxide emissions from power plants that contribute to global warming.

Biden has made fighting climate change a hallmark of his presidency and is seeking to slash carbon dioxide emissions from gasoline-powered vehicles, which make up the largest single source of U.S. greenhouse gas emissions.

At the same time, Biden needs cooperation from the auto industry and political support from auto workers, a key political voting bloc. The United Auto Workers union, which has endorsed Biden, has said it favors the transition to electric vehicles but wants to make sure jobs are preserved and that industry pays top wages to workers who build the EVs and batteries.

White House press secretary Karine Jean-Pierre said that White House officials "don't have any concerns" about the EPA rule.

"We know, with these types of things, it takes time," she told reporters on Air Force One as Biden traveled to Nevada. "But we're still going to stay committed to our (climate) goals."

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Generally, environmental groups have been optimistic about the new EPA plan.

Manish Bapna, president of Natural Resources Defense Council, told reporters last week that he expects the rule will significantly cut carbon emissions from cars and light-duty trucks, which are the source of one-fifth of the nation's greenhouse gas emissions.

"Based on what we hear, there's no reason to doubt that the climate rules for cars and light-duty trucks are going to cut well over 90% of the carbon pollution from new cars, SUVs and pickup trucks" over the next few decades, Bapna said. "That's huge."

Between 2027 and 2055, the EPA rule "will prevent more than 7 billion tons of climate wrecking carbon emissions. That's more than the nation generates in a year. It's absolutely essential, real, concrete progress," Bapna said.

"EPA's clean car standards will put the pedal to the metal as the U.S. races to achieve cleaner, healthier air for everyone," said Amanda Leland, executive director of Environmental Defense Fund, another environmental group.

"Strong clean car standards help provide cleaner air and a safer climate, thousands of dollars in cost savings for our families and hundreds of thousands of new jobs in U.S. manufacturing," Leland said.

Luke Tonachel, an automobile expert with the Natural Resources Defense Council, said the new clean-car standards will encourage the auto industry to "continue investing, as it's already starting to do, over the long-term period" in EV and zero-emission vehicles. The rule also will

send a signal to infrastructure providers and utilities to keep building out the charging infrastructure," he said.

But Dan Becker at the Center for Biological Diversity, said he fears loopholes will let the industry continue to sell gas burners. He also is afraid the industry will get off with doing little during the first three years of the standards, which could be undone if Donald Trump is elected president.

"The bottom line is that the administration is caving to pressure from big oil, big auto and the dealers to stall progress on EVs and now allow more pollution from cars," Becker said.

At a Detroit-area rally in September, Trump insisted Biden's embrace of electric vehicles — a key component of his clean-energy agenda — would ultimately lead to lost jobs.

Republicans and some in the industry have said the rule would require that 67% of new vehicle sales be electric by 2032, forcing people to buy cars, trucks and SUVs that they aren't yet ready to accept.

But EPA Administrator Michael Regan has said the new rule is a performance standard that leaves it to industry to come up with solutions.

U.S. electric vehicle sales grew 47% last year to a record 1.19 million as EV market share rose from 5.8% in 2022 to 7.6%. But EV sales growth slowed toward the end of the year. In December, they rose 34%.

The Alliance for Auto Innovation, a large industry trade group, said in a news release that the ramp up to 67% initially proposed by the EPA is too fast for the industry to achieve. The EPA's pace of EV

adoption is faster than President Joe Biden's goal of electric vehicles being half of U.S. new vehicle sales by 2030, the group said.

"Where we are (or aren't) in 2032 is unclear at this point," the group said. "But moderating the pace of EV adoption in 2027, 2028, 2029 and 2030 would be the right call because it prioritizes more reasonable and achievable electrification targets in the next few (very critical) years."

The EPA's preferred standards take carbon dioxide emissions from 152 grams per mile in 2026 to 73 in 2032, a 52% reduction. The limits would reach 99 grams per mile by 2029.

But under the alternative that environmental groups expect the EPA to adopt, the standards would be eased in the first three years, reaching 112 grams by 2029 but still hitting 73 in 2032.

AI IMAGE-GENERATOR MIDJOURNEY BLOCKS IMAGES OF BIDEN AND TRUMP AS ELECTION LOOMS

The popular artificial intelligence image-generator Midjourney has started blocking its users from creating fake images of President Joe Biden and former President Donald Trump ahead of the upcoming U.S. presidential election, according to tests of the AI tool.

With the election in full swing, it's time to "put some foots down on election-related stuff for a bit," Midjourney CEO David Holz told several hundred members of the service's devoted userbase in a digital office hours event last week.

Declaring that "this moderation stuff is kind of hard," Holz didn't outline exactly what policy changes were being made but described the clampdown as a temporary measure to make it harder for people to abuse the tool. The company didn't immediately respond to a request for comment.

Attempts by journalists to test Midjourney's new policy by asking it to make an image of "Trump and Biden shaking hands at the beach" led to a "Banned Prompt Detected" warning. A second attempt escalated the warning to: "You have triggered an abuse alert."

The tiny company — which has just 11 employees, according to its website — has largely kept silent in the public debate over how generative AI tools could fuel election misinformation around the world. Midjourney was the only maker of a leading image-generating tool that didn't join a voluntary tech industry pact in February to combat AI-generated deepfakes that deliberately trick voters.

"I don't really care about political speech," Holz said. "That's not the purpose of Midjourney. It's not that interesting to me. That said, I also don't want to spend all of my time trying to police political speech. So we're going to have put our foot down on it a bit."

The Center for Countering Digital Hate released a report earlier this month that concluded Midjourney is already being used to produce images that could support disinformation about political candidates or false claims of election fraud.

"Midjourney seemed to have the fewest controls of any AI image-generator when it came to generating images of well-known political

figures like Joe Biden and Donald Trump," said Callum Hood, the group's head of research, in an interview. "Midjourney was almost unique in both being willing to generate those images and generating quite convincing images of candidates."

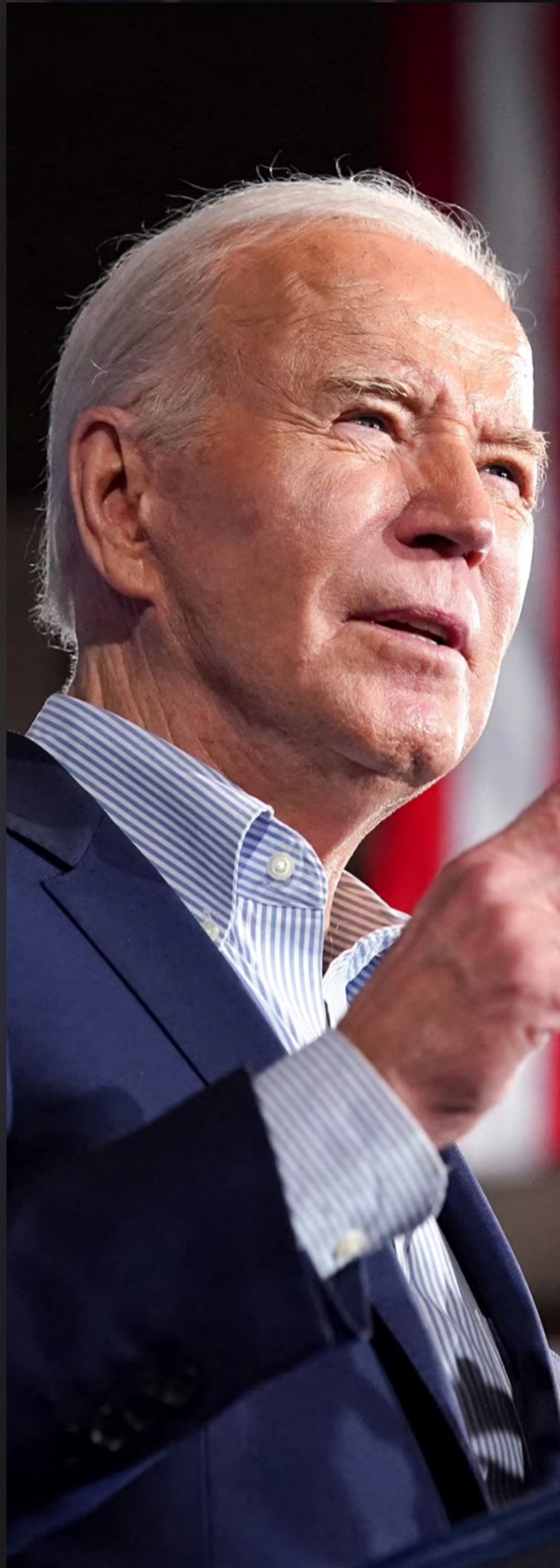
The watchdog group tested Midjourney as well as OpenAI's ChatGPT Plus, Stability AI's DreamStudio and Microsoft's Image Creator, and found all had problems, creating election disinformation in 41% of cases. But "Midjourney performed worst of any tool, failing in 65% of test runs," the report said.

Hood said he wasn't aware if Midjourney changed its policies this week but "its decision to block those images would help seal a major weakness compared to other popular image generators."

As recently as late last week, Midjourney's public database shows users were successfully able to produce images based on prompts such as "Abstract photo of Donald Trump sitting in a tiny electric car" and "joe biden eating ice cream."

But that changed in recent days as users reported they received a warning when trying to make Biden or Trump images. Some complained that Midjourney wasn't properly communicating the changed policy.

Midjourney differs from other image-generators in that it is possible for users to see most other users' written prompts and images because it all happens in public forums on the social media platform Discord. Midjourney's Discord group has more than 19 million members, the largest of any group on the chatting platform. It's where Holz holds his weekly office hours, which can veer into wide-ranging conversations about AI and the future of humanity.



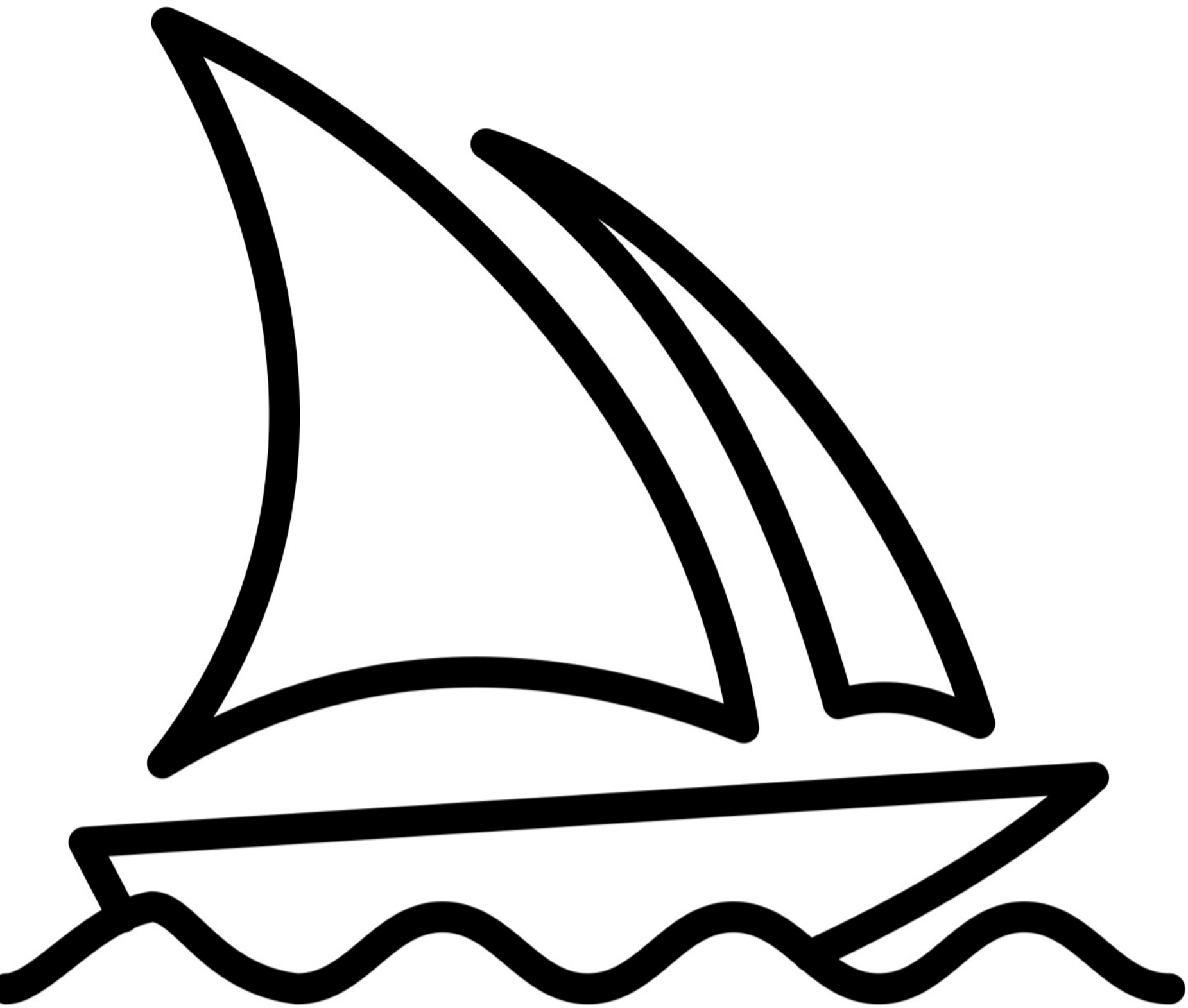
"Anybody who's scared about fake images in 2024 is going to have a hard 2028," Holz said. "It will be a very different world at that point. Like, obviously you're still going to have humans running for president in 2028, but they won't be purely human anymore."

All the candidates at that time will have real-looking "deepfake chatbots" with simulated talking points, he said. Holz warned that people who really want to make deepfakes will find alternatives that "can be fine tuned on specific people and will work better than our systems."

Based near San Francisco and founded in 2020, the company describes itself as an "independent research lab exploring new mediums of thought and expanding the imaginative powers of the human species." It first unveiled the public version of its image-generator in July 2022. That — and the release of a key rival, Stable Diffusion, later that summer — sparked growing fascination with generative AI technology that intensified with the debut of ChatGPT several months later.

Holz told later that year that Midjourney works to ban offensive and harmful content, usually by blocking certain keywords and having its team of moderators track outputs and respond to complaints from other users.

"We really try to let people make the broadest set of images possible but we do ban people every day from the service," Holz said in late 2022.



PAIR ACCUSED OF STEALING BATTERY MANUFACTURING SECRETS FROM TESLA AND STARTING THEIR OWN COMPANY

Two men are accused of starting a business in China using battery manufacturing technology pilfered from Tesla and trying to sell the proprietary information, federal prosecutors in New York said.

Klaus Pflugbeil, 58, a Canadian citizen who lives in Ningbo, China, was arrested this week on Long Island, where he thought he was going to meet with businessmen to negotiate a sale price for the information, federal authorities said. Instead, the businessmen were undercover federal agents.

The other man named in the criminal complaint is Yilong Shao, 47, also of Ningbo. He remains at large. They are charged with conspiracy to transmit trade secrets, which carries up to 10 years in prison if convicted.

A lawyer for Pflugbeil did not immediately return phone and email messages seeking comment. Tesla also did not immediately return an email message.

The technology at issue involves high-speed battery assembly lines that use a proprietary technology owned by Tesla, maker of electric vehicles.

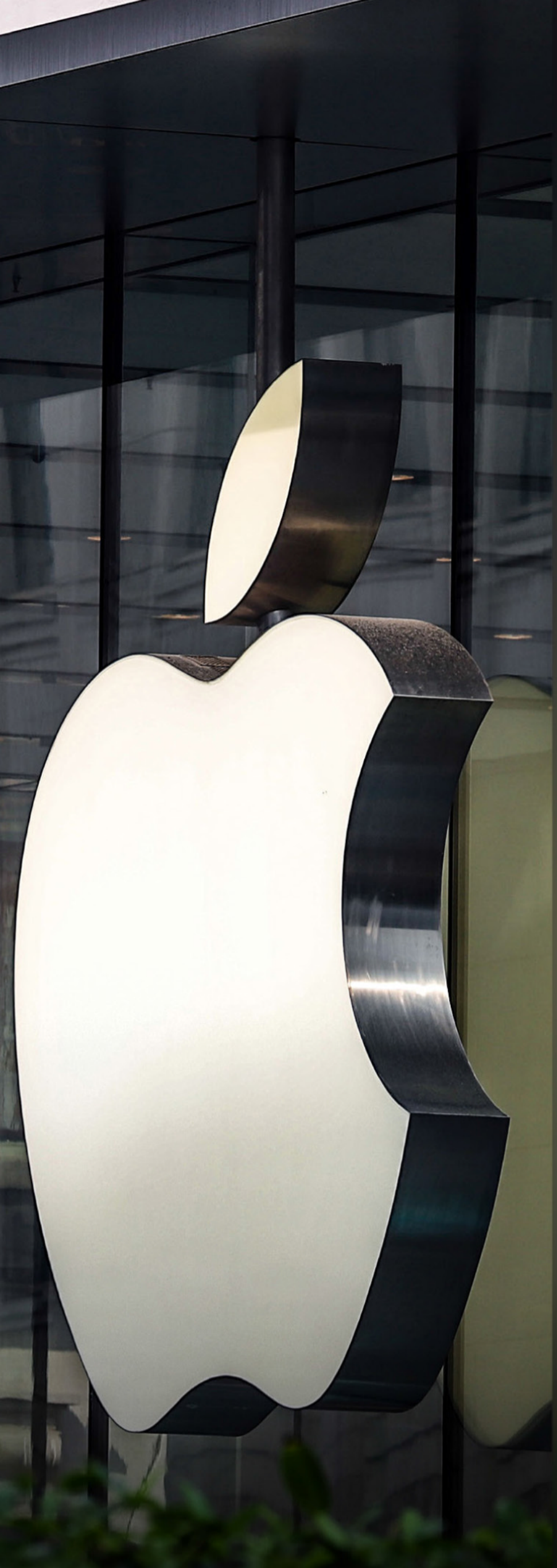
The two men worked at a Canadian company that developed the technology and was bought in 2019 by "a U.S.-based leading manufacturer of battery-powered electric vehicles and battery energy systems," authorities said in the complaint. Tesla then was sole owner of the technology.

Prosecutors did not name either company. But in 2019, Tesla purchased Hibar Systems, a battery manufacturing company in Richmond Hill, Ontario. The deal was first reported by Electric Autonomy Canada.

"The defendants set up a company in China, blatantly stole trade secrets from an American company that are important to manufacturing electric vehicles, and which cost many millions of dollars in research and development, and sold products developed with the stolen trade secrets," Breon Peace, U.S. attorney for the Eastern District of New York, said in a statement with officials with the Justice Department and FBI.

In mid-2020, Pflugbeil and Shao opened their business in China and expanded it to locations in Canada, Germany and Brazil, prosecutors said. The business makes the same battery assembly lines that Tesla uses with its proprietary information, and it markets itself as an alternative source for the assembly lines, authorities said.

Image: Ken Kobayashi



APPLE TO PAY $490 MILLION TO SETTLE ALLEGATIONS THAT IT MISLED INVESTORS ABOUT IPHONE SALES IN CHINA

Apple has agreed to pay $490 million to settle a class-action lawsuit alleging CEO Tim Cook misled investors about a steep downturn in iPhone's sales in China that culminated in a jarring revision to the company's revenue forecast.

The preliminary settlement filed in Oakland, California, federal court stems from a shareholder lawsuit focused on the way Apple relayed information about how iPhone models released in September 2018 were performing in China, one of the company's biggest markets.

Cook signaled that the new iPhones were off to a good start during an investor conference call in early November 2018, according to the complaint.

That reassurance dissolved into a huge letdown on Jan. 2, 2019 when the Cook issued a warning that Apple's revenue for the just-completed quarter would fall $9 billion below management's forecast for the period. What's more, virtually all of the sales drop was traced to weak demand in China.

It marked the first time Apple had cut its revenue guidance since the iPhone's release in 2007 and triggered its stock price to plunge 10% in the next day of frenetic trading, wiping out more than $70 billion in shareholder wealth.

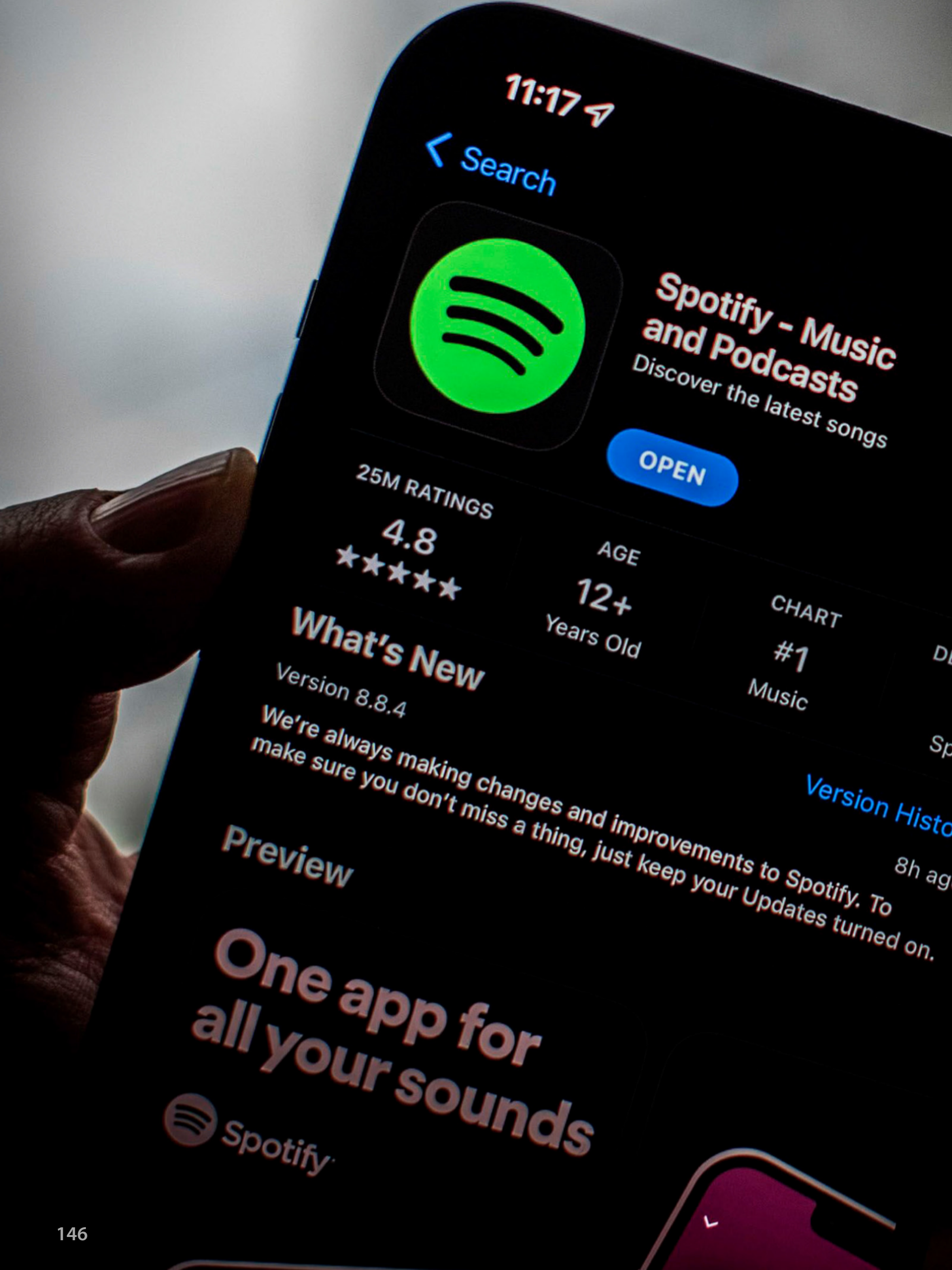
Apple vehemently denied Cook deceived investors about the iPhone's sales in China between early November and early January. The Cupertino, California, company maintained that stance in the settlement documents, but said it decided to make the payment after more than four years of legal wrangling to avoid an "overly burdensome, expensive, and distracting" hassle.

The settlement was reached through a mediator after U.S. District Judge Yvonne Gonzalez Rogers rejected Apple's request to dismiss the case and set a Sept. 9 trial date.

Gonzalez Rogers is now being asked to approve the settlement in a hearing scheduled for April 30.

Thousands of shareholders who bought Apple stock in late 2018 could be eligible for a piece of the settlement, which will be distributed from of a pool that will be less than $490 million after lawyers involved in the case are paid. The attorneys plan to seek up to one-fourth, or about $122 million, of the settlement.

The $490 million payment represents less than 1% of the $97 billion profit that Apple pocketed during its last fiscal year ended in September. Apple shareholders who have held on to their shares have become wealthier too. Apple's stock price has more than quadrupled from where it stood after Cook's China warning, creating an additional $2 trillion in shareholder wealth.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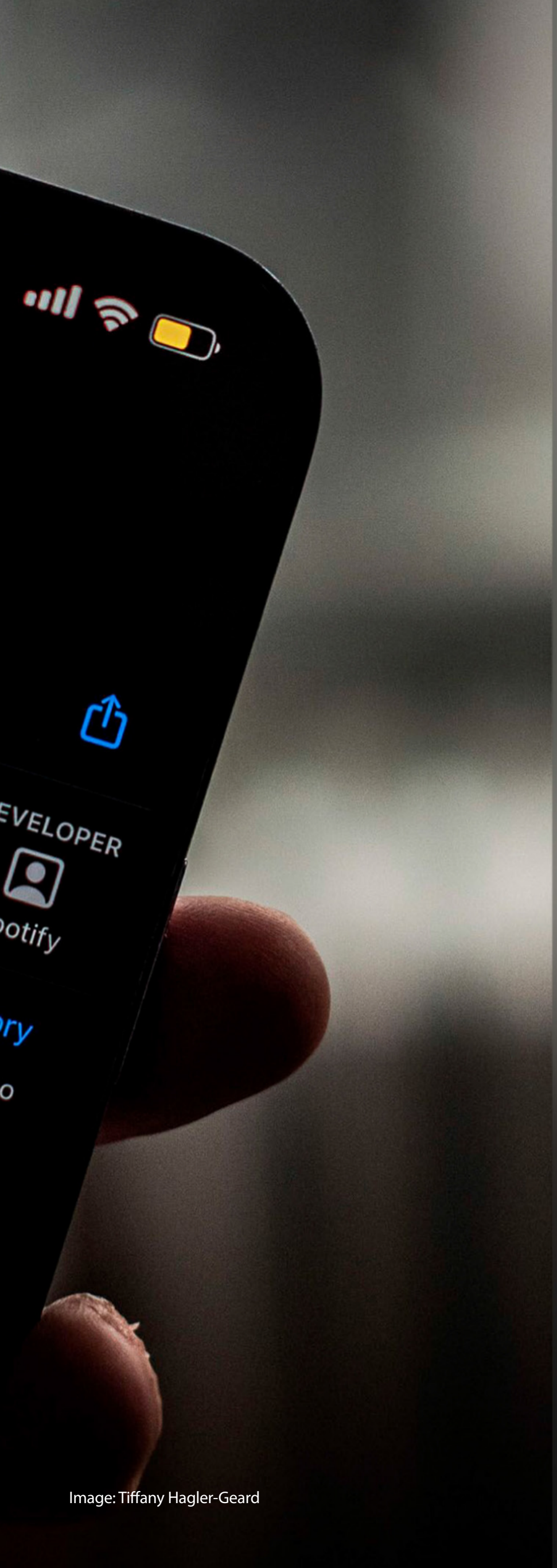


Image: Tiffany Hagler-Geard

SPOTIFY PAID $9 BILLION IN ROYALTIES IN 2023. HERE'S WHAT FUELED THE GROWTH

Spotify paid out $9 billion in streaming royalties last year, the streaming giant said this week in its latest "Loud and Clear" report.

Spotify's fourth annual report, which originally launched in 2021 following criticism over its lack of transparency, noted record accomplishments, including the highest annual payment from any retailer to the music industry.

"This is everything we know about how much is being paid out, how many artists are achieving different levels of success," says Charlie Hellman, the vice president and global head of music

product at Spotify. "So, everyone can have access to the information and be sort of up to date with the state of the industry."

According to the data, 1,250 artists generated over $1 million each in recording and publishing royalties in 2023; 11,600 generated over $100,000 and 66,000 generated over $10,000 — numbers that have almost tripled since 2017.

More than half of those 66,000 artists came from countries where English is not the primary language, the report says, reflecting an increasingly global music landscape.

And "indie" artists — the self-distributed, do-it-yourself acts and those on independent record labels, according to Hellman — accounted for $4.5 billion, half of all royalties paid out by Spotify.

"There are millions of people who've uploaded a song at least once but that doesn't really speak to whether they're an artist, or if they're doing this more as a hobby," Hellman says.

Spotify zooms in on artists that have "at least put up an album's worth of music once they seem to have some indication that they're trying to build a fan base." He estimates there are "about 225,000 professionally aspiring artists" on the platform.

"They have a little bit of a following. They might, you know, have gigs listed on Spotify or things like that," he says.

In December, Spotify announced it was axing 17% of its global workforce, the music streaming service's third round of layoffs in 2023 as it moved to slash costs while focusing on becoming profitable.

Image: Tiffany Hagler-Geard

Spotify

The previous month, Spotify announced it would eliminate payments for songs with less than 1,000 annual streams, starting in 2024.

"Songs that generate less than a thousand streams in a year would be generating pennies, a few cents in royalties," Hellman explains. "So what we're seeing was that there was an increasing amount of uploaders that had $0.03, $0.08, $0.36 sitting there."

For those DIY artists, there's a minimum threshold to withdraw money from a distributor — $5.35 at DistroKid and $1 at TuneCore, two such distributors — and Hellman argues the withdrawal fees would eclipse the royalties.

Spotify — and most other streaming services — pay royalties to the rights holders of the music on its platform, a number which is determined by "streamshare." That's calculated by adding up how many times music owned or controlled by a particular rights holder was streamed and dividing by the total number of streams in that market.

In short: Larger rights holders have a larger percentage of the market share. And a listener streaming an artist 25% of the time does not mean the act receives 25% of the listener's subscription fee.

"All those pennies sitting in bank accounts all over the place was siphoning money away from artists that were really doing this, as an aspiring professional," says Hellman of the decision. "And so, those royalties are now being put in the pot so that they can be redirected to artists that are getting more than a thousand streams a year."

SPACEX COMES CLOSE TO COMPLETING TEST FLIGHT OF MEGA ROCKET BUT LOSES SPACECRAFT NEAR END

SPACE

SpaceX came close to completing an hourlong test flight of its mega rocket on its third try Thursday (14), but the spacecraft was lost as it descended back to Earth.

The company said it lost contact with Starship as it neared its goal, a splashdown in the Indian Ocean. The first-stage booster also ended up in pieces, breaking apart much earlier in the flight over the Gulf of Mexico after launching from the southern tip of Texas near the Mexican border.

"The ship has been lost. So no splashdown today," said SpaceX's Dan Huot. "But again, it's incredible to see how much further we got this time around."

Two test flights last year both ended in explosions minutes after liftoff. By surviving for close to 50 minutes this time, The effort was considered a win by not only SpaceX's Elon Musk, but NASA as well as Starship soared higher and farther than ever before. The space agency is counting on Starship to land its astronauts on the moon in another few years.

The nearly 400-foot (121-meter) Starship, the biggest and most powerful rocket ever built, headed out over the Gulf of Mexico after liftoff, flying east. Spectators crowded the nearby beaches in South Padre Island and Mexico.

A few minutes later, the booster separated seamlessly from the spaceship, but broke apart 1,500 feet (462 meters) above the gulf, instead of plummeting into the water intact. By then, the spacecraft was well to the east and continuing upward, with no people or satellites on board.

Starship reached an altitude of about 145 miles (233 kilometers) as it coasted across the Atlantic and South Africa, before approaching the Indian

SPACEX

Ocean. But 49 minutes into the flight — with just 15 minutes remaining — all contact was lost and the spacecraft presumably broke apart.

SpaceX's Elon Musk had just congratulated his team a little earlier. "SpaceX has come a long way," he said via X, formerly called Twitter. The rocket company was founded 22 years ago.

NASA watched with keen interest: The space agency needs Starship to succeed in order to land astronauts on the moon in the next two or so years. This new crop of moonwalkers — the first since last century's Apollo program — will descend to the lunar surface in a Starship after transferring from NASA's Orion capsule in lunar orbit.

NASA Administrator Bill Nelson quickly congratulated SpaceX on what he called a successful test flight as part of the space agency's Artemis moon-landing program.

The stainless steel, bullet-shaped spacecraft launched atop a first-stage booster known as the Super Heavy. Both the booster and the spacecraft are designed to be reusable, although they were never meant to be salvaged.

On Starship's inaugural launch last April, several of the booster's 33 methane-fueled engines failed and the booster did not separate from the spacecraft, causing the entire vehicle to explode and crash into the gulf four minutes after liftoff.

SpaceX managed to double the length of the flight during November's trial run. While all 33 engines fired and the booster peeled away as planned, the flight ended in a pair of explosions, first the booster and then the spacecraft.

The Federal Aviation Administration reviewed

all the corrections made to Starship, before signing off on the launch. The FAA said after the flight that it would again investigate what happened. As during the second flight, all 33 booster engines performed well during ascent, according to SpaceX.

Initially, SpaceX plans to use the mammoth rockets to launch the company's Starlink internet satellites, as well as other spacecraft. Test pilots would follow to orbit, before the company flies wealthy clients around the moon and back. Musk considers the moon a stepping stone to Mars, his ultimate quest.

NASA is insisting that an empty Starship land successfully on the moon, before future moonwalkers climb aboard. The space agency is targeting the end of 2026 for the first moon landing crew under the Artemis program, named after the mythological twin sister of Apollo.

TEXAS APPROVES LAND-SWAPPING DEAL WITH SPACEX AS COMPANY HOPES TO EXPAND ROCKET-LAUNCH OPERATIONS

SpaceX would acquire public land in Texas to expand its rocket-launch facilities under a tentative deal that is moving forward after months of opposition from nearby residents and officials near the U.S.-Mexico border.

The tentative land-swapping deal moved forward when the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission unanimously voted in favor of swapping 43 noncontiguous acres from Boca

SPACEX
SPACEX

Chica State Park with SpaceX, which would give the state 477 acres about 10 miles south of the park near Brownsville, Texas.

Some of the 43 contested acres are landlocked with no public access but with protected plant and animal species. Although SpaceX is proposing swapping the public land for 477 acres, it has not yet purchased that property. None of the land in the deal has beach access, but the 43 acres sit near protected federal land and lagoons that stretch along the coast.

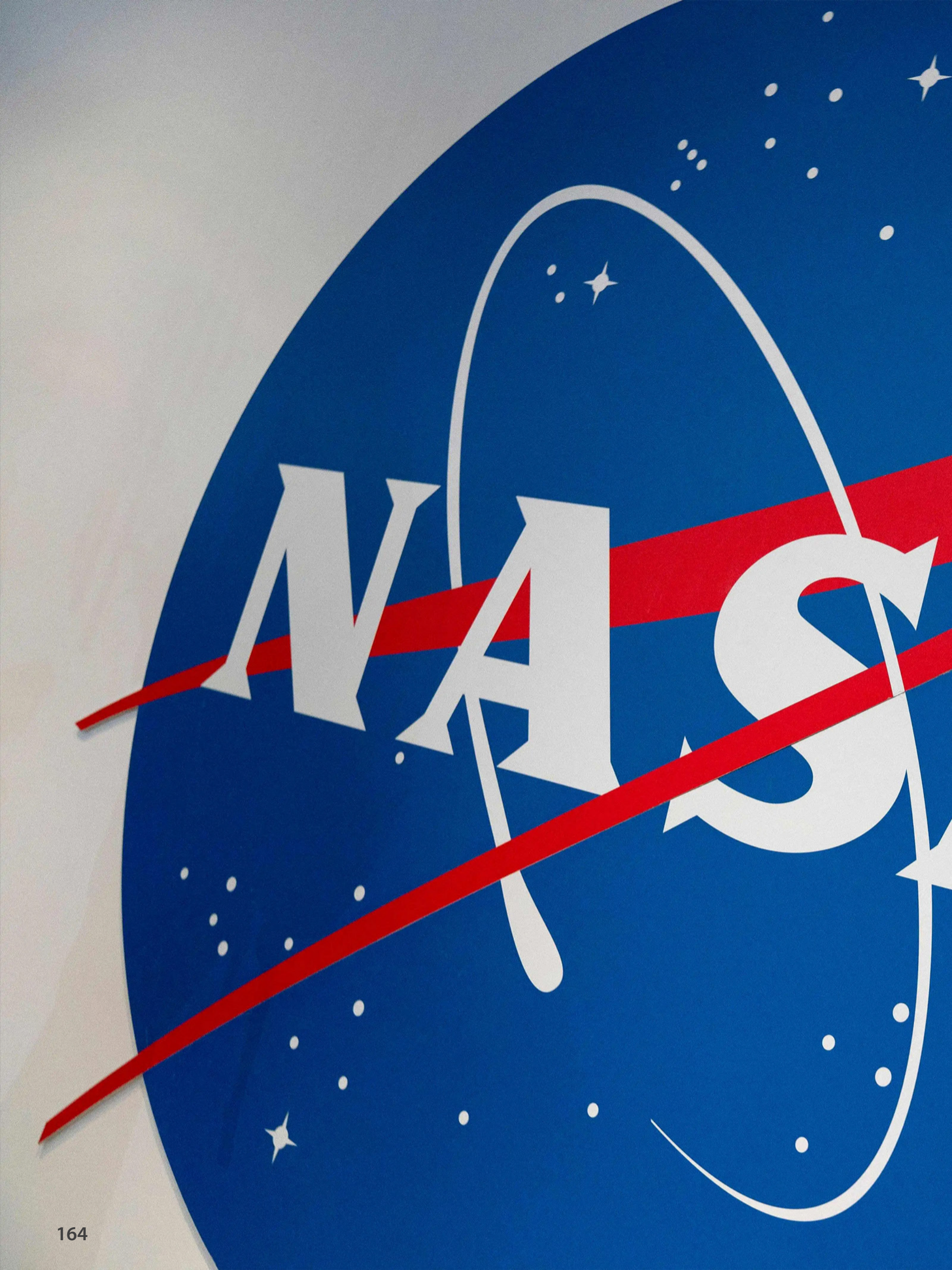
"Through this transaction we are guaranteeing the conservation of 477 acres, which would otherwise potentially be developed into condominiums or strip centers," Jeffery D. Hildebrand, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Commission chairman appointed by Gov. Greg Abbott, said at the meeting's close.

The deal started in 2019 as a conversation between the state and SpaceX. But it was finally worked out in 2023, said David Yoskowitz, the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's executive director.

People sent over 2,300 letters to the department to voice their opinion. Although the majority, 60%, were opposed, the department recommended the state vote in favor of the deal, which had the support from the Democratic state senator for the area, the comptroller and the Texas General Land Office commissioner.

Dozens of people traveled up to the meeting in the state capital of Austin to voice their support or discontent with the plan.

Cyrus Reed, the legislative and conservation director with the Lone Star chapter of the Sierra Club, was among those opposing the deal.



"We think, as an alternative, if we think the 477 acres are valuable, go and buy it. We the voters of Texas have given you money to purchase valuable land," Reed said, referring to the state's Centennial Parks Conservation Fund.

In November, voters approved the establishment of the fund, creating the largest endowment for park development in Texas history.

"And remember the precedent you're setting," Reed said. "If you approve this deal, that means every industrialist, everyone who has an interest in expanding is going to look at this and say, 'Where can I go find some land that I can exchange to continue to pollute and hurt other land?' So, that's not a net benefit for Texas."

SpaceX Starbase general manager Kathryn Lueders attended the meeting and said she has seen wildlife coexist with spacecraft in Florida when she worked as a program manager for NASA.

"At the same time, it further expands on a critical refuge and allows Texans to receive a coveted property which has been sought by multiple state and federal agencies for conservation efforts for over a decade," she said.

An environmental assessment, public comment period and other consultations could mean the disposition of the property could take up to 18 months to complete, according to the Texas Parks and Wildlife Department's general counsel.

FRENCH REGULATORS FINE GOOGLE $272 MILLION IN DISPUTE WITH NEWS PUBLISHERS

France's competition watchdog hit Google on Wednesday with another big fine tied to a long-running dispute over payments to French publishers for their news.

The French Competition Authority said it issued the 250 million euro ($272 million) penalty because of Google's failure to comply with some commitments it made in a negotiating framework.

The dispute is part of a larger effort by authorities in the European Union and around the world to force Google and other tech companies to compensate news publishers for content.

Image: Thibault Camus

The U.S. tech giant was forced to negotiate with French publishers after a court in 2020 upheld an order saying payments were required by a 2019 European Union copyright directive.

Google said in a blog post that it agreed to settle the fine, which was imposed over how it conducted the negotiations, "because it's time to move on." It said the fine was "not proportionate" to the issues raised by the French watchdog and "doesn't sufficiently take into account" Google's efforts to answer and resolve the concerns.

France was the first of the EU's 27 nations to adopt the copyright directive, which lays out a way for publishers and news companies to strike licensing deals with online platforms.

Wednesday's decision by the French Competition Authority is the fourth in as many years against Google for failing to comply with the EU legal framework that aims to establish "necessary conditions for balanced negotiations between press agencies, publishers and digital platforms."

The French antitrust agency had issued temporary orders to Google in April 2020 to hold talks within three months with news publishers. In 2021, the agency fined Google 500 million euros ($592 million) for failing to negotiate a fair payment for publishers' news.

Image: Vincent Isore

UN SAYS E-WASTE FROM TRASHED ELECTRIC DEVICES IS PILING UP AND RECYCLING ISN'T KEEPING PACE

U.N. agencies have warned that electrical and electronic waste is piling up worldwide while recycling rates remain low and are likely to fall even further.

The agencies define "e-waste" as any discarded device with a plug or battery, including cellphones, electronic cars and toys, TVs, e-cigarettes, laptop computers and solar panels.

In a new report released this week, the U.N.'s International Telecommunications Union and research arm UNITAR said some 62 million tons of "e-waste" was generated in 2022, enough to fill tractor-trailers that could be lined up bumper to bumper around the globe. It's on track to reach 82 million tons by 2030.

Metals — including copper, gold and iron — made up half of the 62 million tons, worth a total of some $91 billion, the report said. Plastics accounted for 17 million tons and the remaining 14 million tons include substances like composite materials and glass.

The U.N. says just over 22% of the e-waste mass was properly collected and recycled in 2022. It is expected to decline to 20% by the end of the decade because of the "staggering growth" of such waste due to higher consumption, limited repair options, shorter product life cycles, growing "electronification" of society, and inadequate e-waste management infrastructure, the agencies said.

They said some of the discarded electronic devices contained hazardous elements like mercury, as well as rare Earth metals coveted by tech industry manufacturers. Currently, only 1% of the demand for the 17 minerals that make up the rare metals is met through recycling.

About half of all e-waste is generated in Asia, where few countries have laws on e-waste or collection targets, according to the report. Recycling and collection rates top 40% in Europe, where per-capita waste generation is highest: nearly 18 kilograms (39 pounds). In Africa, which generates the least of any of the five big global regions, recycling and collection rates hover at about 1%, it said.

"The latest research shows that the global challenge posed by e-waste is only going to grow," said Cosmas Luckyson Zavazava, head of the ITU telecommunication development bureau. "With less than half of the world implementing and enforcing approaches to manage the problem, this raises the alarm for sound regulations to boost collection and recycling."

For some, e-waste represents a way to earn cash by rummaging through trash in the developing world to find coveted commodities, despite the health risks.

At the Dandora dumpsite where garbage collected from the Kenyan capital of Nairobi ends up — even though a court declared it full over a generation ago — scavengers try to earn a living by picking through rubbish for e-waste that can be sold to businesses as recycled material.

Steve Okoth hopes the flow continues so he can eke out an income, but he knows the risks.

"When the e-waste comes here, it contains some powder which affects my health," he said, adding that when electronic devices heat up, they release gases and he "can't come to work because of chest problems."

NORTH

However, Okoth said they don't have any other options: "We are now used to the smoke because if you don't go to work you will not eat."

Recycling plants, like Nairobi's WEEE center, have collection points across Kenya, where people can safely get rid of old electric equipment.

"We take inventory of the items," said Catherine Wasolia, WEEE's chief operating officer, to check for data on submitted devices and wipe them clean. Then they test each to assess if "it can be reused or repurposed."

E-waste expert George Masila worries about the impact of electronic waste on soil.

"When you have all this e-waste — either in the dumpsites or mercilessly deposited anywhere else — it could have major effects on the soil," Masila said. "Every year it rains and water flows and attracts all these elements that are deposited into the environment. You have water getting contaminated."

He said greater recycling and re-use of such materials, "are some of the things we should be considering."

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